The Critical Reading Question of the MFSRH Examination

Aisling Baird

Introduction
The Critical Reading Question (CRQ) paper is an integral component of the Membership of the Faculty of Sexual and Reproductive Healthcare (MFSRH) Part 2 Examination [previously the Membership of the Faculty of Family Planning and Reproductive Health Care (MFFP) Examination]. It usually consists of three pieces for candidates to read, with five to ten questions per piece. The marks account for 30% of the Part 2 Examination.

The CRQ paper
After each examination, candidates are asked for feedback. Comments vary from:

“Hard to know what to expect” and “? Relevance to our field” to “Very difficult”.

Some candidates question the rationale behind the exercise:

“Do not understand what knowledge is being tested … in clinical practice … you have CEU … do we need to fail this exam on this.”

“How relevant CRQ are I do not know. An excellent course would be so much more relevant. The one scenario proved it – HRT – doctors do not understand it!”

A common theme is the lack of time, and yet my experience as an invigilator shows that most of the candidates finish writing with ten or more minutes to spare! The ability critically to assess current research and adapt it for use in practice (or to reject it) is a vital tool for any clinician. Specialists in the field need to interpret the evidence for non-specialists and professions allied to medicine. In addition, patients are increasingly well informed in health care matters and will expect evaluation when the latest ‘fad’ or problem hits the headlines. Many of those who achieve the MFSRH will themselves be involved in research.

In spite of the reputation of the CRQ and the concerns of the candidates, recent marks show mean scores in the high fifties. This compares favourably with marks awarded for the Modified Essay Question (MEQ) sister paper (i.e. mean scores over the last 3 years for these two papers were 58.65 for the CRQ and 58.78 for the MEQ).

Preparation of the CRQ
The CRQ has the reputation of being difficult since ‘academics’ are involved in its preparation, and candidates believe that the questions involve a lot of reading. The questions are prepared by a CRQ group, the current members of which are all practising clinicians in family planning, and the questions are all assessed for consistency, fairness and validity. The details of the questions are informed by current best practice in educational theory and informed by current best practice in educational theory and fairness and validity. The details of the questions are planned, who informs their practice by keeping up to date with the literature.

Preparation for the CRQ
Critical reading can be straightforward. Greenhalgh advises us first to ‘get our bearings’,1 that is, ask what the study is about using three seminal questions:

● Why was the study done, and what clinical question were the authors addressing?
● What type of study was done?
● Was this design appropriate to the research?

To these I would add a fourth question:

● Are the authors’ conclusions justified from the study design and analysis?

Candidates feel ill-prepared. However, there are three example questions on the Faculty website2 and I am going to release some more shortly. Career-grade and subspecialty trainees in sexual and reproductive health have critical reading as part of a module for which there are recommended study resources. Other candidates might tap into these or into formal teaching sessions.

The Faculty publishes a small reading list2 and there are many critical reading and EBM texts around. Candidates should be familiar with a simple ‘statistics for the practising clinician’-type text. Candidates should identify papers published in peer-reviewed journals and perform regular critiques. Should a paper be a good one, the practising clinician should be able to explain to themselves why it is good, if it is going to inform daily practice. Courses in research methods are often very helpful; the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists offers such a course, but there are also many local ones.

My advice for candidates is as follows:

● Don’t panic because the CRQ paper might seem to cover strange territory.
● Make sure you understand the methodology of different study designs.
● Understand the ‘hierarchy of evidence’.1
● Find a book on critical appraisal of papers that you are comfortable reading.
● Make use of the examples on the Faculty website.
● Find a local group that critically appraises papers and look out for correspondence following the publication of a paper. This often gives important clues to study design and analysis faults.

And finally remember that:

● There is sufficient time allowed in the examination to complete the CRQ paper.
● Candidates generally perform well on this paper.

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References
2 Faculty website, section on Training & Exams (Membership Exam). www.fsrh.org.
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This makes critical thinking questions well, critical. As Terry Heick explains in What Does Critical Thinking Mean?: “To think critically about something is to claim to first circle its meaning entirely—to walk all the way around it so that you understand it in a way that’s uniquely you. The thinker works with their own thinking tools—schema. Background knowledge. In thinking critically, the thinker has to see its parts, its form, its function, and its context. After this kind of survey and analysis you can come to evaluate it—bring to bear your own distinctive cognition on the thing so that you can point out flaws, underscore bias, emphasize merit—to get inside the mind of the author, designer, creator, or clockmaker and critique his work.”

A Cheat Sheet For Critical Thinking. Critical Examination is an established technique that aids thinking in a systematic and logical way. It is defined by BS 3138: 34004 as “the systematic analysis of information about a problem, procedure or activity by which it is subjected to exhaustive challenge with regard to need, simplifications, combination, sequence and alternatives.” Effectively it is a structured and analytical approach which is able to use creative thinking techniques to help develop a range of alternative suggestions and proposals. Every aspect of an activity can be examined and questioned. There are a series of questions that can be asked. The extent and range of questions will vary, depending on the subject of review. Questions which can be asked of a process (and answered) will include