Situational judgment tests reliably measure professional attributes important for clinical practice

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Article

International research consistently shows situational judgment tests (SJTs) to be a reliable and valid selection method for a range of professional attributes (such as integrity, empathy, and teamwork) important in any health care profession. Given this evidence, SJTs have received a great deal of attention both in the academic literature and through commentary from stakeholders including trainees, which is unsurprising given their increasing use within medical selection. While there is over 40 years of research evidence on SJTs, it is acknowledged that, as a relatively new method within medical selection, applicant reactions are not always positive. We thank Najim et al² for raising some important concerns in relation to perceptions of the UK Foundation SJT. In a recent review of the research evidence,³ SJTs are shown to be a reliable and valid selection method compared to many other tools, including personal statements (or white space questions) on application forms. In response to Najim et al’s letter, we highlight three key clarifications to inform further debate.

1. Najim et al criticize the test specification for the Foundation SJT and coverage of the attributes measured: “the authors cannot comprehend how the written SJT fairly and accurately tests these attributes.” This view assumes that the SJT attempts to measure all nine of the professional attributes required for the role of foundation doctor identified through a job analysis study. The job analysis report and all attributes measured in addition to academic attainment, and 3) the SJT represents a cost-effective approach to selection rather than attempting to interview approximately 8,000 candidates each year, which would be logistically impossible. We present these points to inform future research and encourage debate, and conclude that the SJT is an appropriate and fair measurement method to be used as one part of selection to the UK Foundation Programme.

Keywords: situational judgment test, reliability, validity, fairness, candidate perceptions
It is crucial to note that the possession of a medical degree has never been the only requirement for recruitment into the Foundation Programme. As with any job application, a requirement to consider applicants' ability to meet the person specification is the most important requirement, possession of a degree being only a part of the person specification. Initially, “white space” questions were used in varying formats to determine this. However, it was agreed that this form of test had limitations, and therefore work was done to consider what would replace this, ultimately leading to the introduction of the SJT.

2. Najim et al suggest that there is a lack of standardization when assessing students ranked “middle” at the UK’s best and worst medical schools. Which do they perceive as the UK’s best and worst medical schools and on what evidence do they define them as such? The authors refer to Simon et al’s study that found no correlation between the Educational Performance Measure and the SJT. However, this preliminary study is based on a sample of only 239 applicants in one location. In larger-scale study analyses undertaken year on year across the full sample of applicants (n=8,000), the correlation between SJT and Educational Performance Measure is consistently around r=0.30 (2013: r=0.30; 2014: r=0.30; 2015: r=0.34), which is to be expected. These results are made available publicly each year in an annual technical report published on the Foundation Programme website, and it would be prudent to also refer to full sample data as the basis for commentary. In recent studies, importantly the Foundation SJT positively correlates with subsequent in-training supervisor ratings and so provides good evidence ofpredictive validity.

The Foundation SJT is specifically designed to measure nonacademic attributes important for trainees entering clinical practice, and it is important that these attributes are measured reliably at the point of entry to the Foundation Programme in addition to a measure of academic performance. We agree with Najim et al in highlighting that examinations up until this point are largely based on academic performance from General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) exams to medical school finals. Junior doctors go through a gruelling 9 years of back-to-back examinations, making them the UK’s most academically assessed students.

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