



## American Board of Otolaryngology E-NEWS

*Serving the public and the profession since 1924*

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### **ABOto EXAMINATION FEES**

The American Board of Otolaryngology (ABOto) has served the public and the profession for over 75 years. The founding members of the board recognized the need to have a high quality examination to certify otolaryngologist-head and neck surgeons. As medical knowledge has increased over the years, so has the need for the examinations to keep pace with modern medicine. The ABOto now conducts four examinations annually: The Otolaryngology Training Exam (OTE or "In-Service Exam"), the Written Qualifying Exam, the Oral Certifying Exam, and the Neurotology Subspecialty Exam. Since some examinees have asked how the exam fees are established, the Board would like to clarify this issue.

Test questions are developed by carefully selected otolaryngologist-head and neck surgeons who volunteer their time. Each year, the 36 members of the joint ABOto/AAO-HNS Task Force on New Materials write nearly 900 multiple-choice questions that will be used in the OTE and Written Qualifying exam. Each of these item writers receives training in question writing from the ABOto as well as the National Board of Medical Examiners (NBME). The lengthy patient protocols used in the Oral Certifying Exam and the Neurotology Subspecialty Exam are written by ABOto Directors and Senior Examiners.

Once the items are written, they are subjected to a vigorous review process that begins at the ABOto office where the questions are edited for format and grammar. The edited questions are then sent to the NBME where professional medical editors review the items and make additional edits. Finally, a group of ABOto Senior Examiners reviews the questions for a final check of medical accuracy and classification. All of the items are maintained in a sophisticated computer database from which items are selected by a custom ABOto computer program based on the exam blueprint (composition) and certain statistical requirements. Finally, all items are field tested for statistical validity prior to use as a counted question.

Exam administration also adds to the exam fees. For example, the OTE is administered at 108 sites which requires the identification and training of over 200 proctors. In addition, the test materials must be securely shipped to and from the exam site. The Oral Certifying Exam is even more complex as over 100 examiners undergo a one day training course each year in addition to the two day exam administration. Imaging studies, photomicrographs, and audiograms must be accurately reproduced along with the patient protocols for each of the examiners. Most of the ABOto staff attend the exam to ensure security and proper movement of candidates. Finally, the score sheets are scanned, analyzed by a psychometric firm, and discussed by the Exam Committee members in one or more conference calls.

All of this effort to produce fair, defensible, psychometrically-valid exams is an expensive process. Direct costs for all exams in 2002 were almost \$500,000 and do not include allocated office space or equipment, new exam development initiatives, and the staff salaries related to exam development and administration which brings the total expense to over \$1 million. Since the ABOto does not have any other source of direct funding, the long-standing policy has held that the fees for exams should cover the exam expenses. Therefore, the exam fees truly reflect the cost of creating and administering the exams. Since there are fewer than 300 examinees a year for the certifying exams, the costs cannot be spread out over a large group of examinees as other boards such as internal medicine can do. The fee for the ABOto exam is in line with that of other small boards that require an oral exam.

The ABOto is sensitive to the fact that the exams are expensive, particularly for otolaryngologists who have just completed residency and are starting a practice. It is expensive for any board to produce and execute a valid, high-quality exam, and the cost per examinee for smaller boards such as ours certainly is significant. In addition, the ABOto is actively engaged in exploring new examination technologies to improve the examination process and control the cost of the exam.