Significantly Improved American Board of Surgery In-Training Examination Scores Associated With Weekly Assigned Reading and Preparatory Examinations

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Hypothesis: Weekly reading assignments combined with weekly examinations can significantly improve American Board of Surgery In-Training Examination (ABSITE) scores among a group of residents already scoring above the national average.

Design: Prospective educational study of surgical residents.

Intervention: Beginning in July 2001, residents were given weekly reading assignments, followed by a multiple-choice examination, prepared and scored by the program director.

Main Outcome Measure: Mean change in ABSITE scores from 2001 to 2002.

Results: The mean total test ABSITE scores significantly improved from 58.7% in 2001 to 75.2% in 2002 ($P = .008$). The improvement was significantly greater in the basic science portion of the ABSITE (57.6% in 2001 vs 72.5% in 2002, $P = .04$) than in the clinical management section (57.6% in 2001 vs 68.9% in 2002, $P = .11$). There were no differences in mean ABSITE scores in other years (1999 to 2000 or 2000 to 2001). There was no correlation between the change in ABSITE scores from 2001 to 2002, level of residency training, United States Medical Licensing Examination scores, or performance on weekly preparatory examinations.

Conclusion: Weekly reading assignments combined with weekly preparatory examinations significantly improved mean overall ABSITE scores among a group of residents who were already scoring above the national average.

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Several previous studies have assessed factors that affect American Board of Surgery In-Training Examination (ABSITE) scores. Resident survey findings suggest that performance is affected by conference attendance, amount of sleep, anxiety level, amount of study, and previous examination results. Good performance on the ABSITE is important as there is evidence that a surgical resident’s performance correlates with success on subsequent board examinations.

In recent years, resident performance on the ABSITE at Harbor–UCLA Medical Center has averaged just above the national average. Despite reasonably good test results, we embarked on an educational endeavor to improve ABSITE scores among our categorical residents. We hypothesized that weekly reading assignments combined with weekly examinations would significantly improve mean ABSITE scores (year 2002) compared with scores from previous years (2001, 2000, and 1999) in a group that was already performing at or above the national average. We further hypothesized that the actual weekly test scores would correlate with ABSITE performance.

METHODS

On a weekly schedule, beginning in July 2001 through January 2002, residents were assigned to read a chapter in a major surgery textbook, with the eventual goal of covering all areas of surgery within the period. A 15-question, multiple-choice examination (MCE) was prepared by the program director (PD) each week, in a format similar to that of the ABSITE, which covered the material in the assigned chapter. Residents were given 15 minutes in which to complete the closed-book MCE, under the proctoring of the PD. On completion of the MCE, the tests were exchanged with and corrected by an adjacent resident. The PD announced the correct answers and the number of questions answered correctly was written at the top of the MCE.
The mean ABSITE scores by PGY level for 1999 to 2002 are shown in Table 1. The overall mean ABSITE score was 75.2% for all residents in 2002. This was significantly higher than the 2001, 2000, and 1999 scores ($P < .008$). There were no differences in the mean ABSITE scores from 1999 to 2000 ($P = .9$) or from 2000 to 2001 ($P = .5$). In fact, there was a small but nonsignificant downtrend in the overall mean scores during those years.

The mean percentile score on the basic science section of the examination was 72.5% in 2002 vs 57.6% in 2001 ($P = .04$) (Table 2). The mean percentile score on the clinical management section was 68.9% in 2002 vs 57.6% in 2001 ($P = .11$).

The largest increase in mean scores in 2002 occurred among the PGY-4 residents, whose mean percentile score increased from 61.0% in 2001 to 89.3% in 2002. The smallest increase in mean scores was noted among the PGY-5 residents, whose mean score increased only from 50.6% to 54.0%. Ten (53%) of 19 residents scored at or above the 80th percentile on ABSITE 2002, compared with only 2 (11%) of 19 residents on ABSITE 2001 ($P = .005$).
CORRELATION WITH CHANGE IN MEAN ABSITE SCORES FROM 2001 TO 2002

There was no correlation between the change in mean ABSITE scores from 2001 to 2002 and scores on the United States Medical Licensing Examination 1 (0.17, \( P = .49 \)) or 2 (-0.06, \( P = .89 \)), PGY level (-0.17, \( P = .49 \)), or 1999 (0.28, \( P = .4 \)) or 2000 (-0.18, \( P = .54 \)) ABSITE scores. There was also no correlation with the mean overall score on the MCEs or with the number of MCEs taken. Of note, there was also no correlation between PGY level and the mean score on the weekly MCEs.

The present study demonstrates that the institution of weekly reading assignments combined with weekly review examinations significantly improved mean ABSITE scores in a group of surgical residents who were already performing above the national average. The mean ABSITE percentile score increased from 58.7% to 75.2%. Scores on the basic science portion of the examination improved more than the clinical management scores. There was a remarkable jump in the number of residents scoring above the 80th percentile. In 2002, more than half of the residents (10/19) scored above the 80th percentile nationally, compared with only 2 (11%) of the residents in the prior year. When analyzing the trend in ABSITE scores from previous years, there were no significant changes in mean ABSITE scores from 1999 to 2000 or from 2000 to 2001. The present study differs from previously published studies in several respects. First, we included only residents who had taken at least 1 prior ABSITE. This allowed for a valid comparison. Second, in addition to assigned reading, a weekly examination was prepared and administered by the PD, attendance records were taken, and weekly scores were tallied. Therefore, a specific new quantifiable intervention was undertaken to determine if ABSITE scores would improve.

The reason for the significant rise in ABSITE scores in 2002 may be multifactorial. Certainly, one may argue that the existence of a specific reading assignment, coupled with a weekly review prepared by the PD, sent a message to the residents as to the significance of ABSITE preparation. The format of the weekly MCEs themselves may have familiarized and prepared the residents for the ABSITE format. Positive reinforcement, in the form of public praise for top performances, may have induced residents to better prepare. In addition, following each examination, the PD provided a review of the questions and emphasized important points. Interestingly, the actual scores on the MCEs did not correlate with ABSITE scores. This finding suggests that the process of creating a formal reading program with weekly examinations and review was more important in improving the scores than the actual content of the MCEs. One potential weakness of our study is that we did not quantify the exact amount each resident read.

Previous studies have analyzed factors associated with improved ABSITE scores. Most of these studies have focused on survey responses before and after taking the ABSITE. Godellas and Huang\(^1\) demonstrated via questionnaires that conference attendance, previous performance, probationary status, amount of sleep, and amount of study were significant in explaining most of the variance in ABSITE scores. Hirvela and Becker\(^4\) found that programmed reading significantly improved ABSITE scores. Their study differs from the present one in several important respects. The present study compared the year-to-year change in individual residents’ ABSITE performances using national percentile scores, which were analyzed using paired measurements and nonparametric comparisons. In the study by Hirvela and Becker, improvement in ABSITE scores for interns in 2 separate periods was assessed with parametric statistical analysis using standard scores rather than national percentiles.

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