SHORT COMMUNICATION

The European Board of Neurology Examination – junior neurologists are eager to take the challenge

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Background: The Union Européenne des Médecins Spécialistes Section of Neurology (UEMS SEN)/European Board of Neurology (EBN) examination was launched in 2009 to set standards in knowledge and skills for the next generation of European neurologists.

Methods: Stimulated by the low participation at the first examination, we conducted a survey amongst 76 junior colleagues to assess awareness, motivation and obstacles regarding this examination.

Results: Remarkably, junior neurologists indicated great interest in the examination and motivation to spend additional preparation time (up to 6 months) with the aim to catch up with European standards and improve the care of patients. However, there are major issues, which detain our colleagues from taking the examination including the amount of the examination fee, the potential lack of language abilities and the varying usage of the recommended books for preparation.

Conclusions: This survey highlights the positive attitude of junior neurologists regarding initiatives to improve clinical skills and knowledge. Moreover, this study delineated several factors, which may be considered in the future to increase participation and substantiate the significance of the examination.

Background

Medical care and education in the European Union (EU) is a national matter and characterized by a broad spectrum of standards, which can be traced back to a variety of economical, historical and region-specific developments [1]. Quality assurance of neurology training, a key aspect for the adaptation process towards European standards, remains a national competency. The Union Européenne des Médecins Spécialistes Section of Neurology (UEMS SEN)/European Board of Neurology (EBN) took up this issue and developed the EBN examination to set standards and assurance for neurology training. The preparations took over 3 years and included the development of examination structure and contents. The current examination fee of 600€ does not sufficiently cover the costs of the examination. Candidates from the EU and Turkey who hold a national board certificate or fulfil certain criteria are eligible to take the examination (for details: http://www.uems-neuroboard.org).

The European Association of Young Neurologists and Trainees (EAYNT) is a non-governmental, independent non-profit organization [2]. Major aims include lobbying for improved neurology training conditions and endorsement of educational exchange activities throughout Europe. Major European bodies including the UEMS/EBN have accepted a EAYNT delegate in collaboration with the Permanent Working Group of European Junior Doctors (PWG) to their boards and the EAYNT launched an independent information campaign regarding the examination. Even so, only six candidates participated in the first examination round held in summer 2009. This low attendance hinted to an unexpectedly low interest and stimulated us to carry out a survey amongst junior colleagues to shed light on the individual level of knowledge and position regarding the EBN examination.

Material and methods

A paper questionnaire consisting of nine questions (Data S1) was handed out to all participants of the
workshop on ‘The European Perspective for junior neurologists’ at the EFNS Academy 2010, a 4-day intensive course for neurologists in training. The survey was completed by 76 workshop participants (100%), 61% were female. Amongst were 32 residents and 41 national board examined neurologists (three did not indicate their status). Mean time since graduation from University was 6.2 years, and the specialists had worked for a mean of 3.9 years following board certification. For a detailed analysis (Fig. 1), participants were allocated to three groups based on the regions of origin. 1. EU or European Economic Area (EU/EEA, n = 30): Czech Rep., Finland, Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Spain. 2. Eastern Europe (EE, n = 35): Armenia, Belarus, Croatia, Georgia, Moldova, Rus-

Figure 1 The Union Européenne des Médecins Spécialistes Section of Neurology (UEMS SEN)/European Board of Neurology (EBN) results of the young neurologists’ survey.
Results

As shown in Fig. 1a, more than half of the physicians working in the EU/EEA were familiar with the examination. A slightly lower rate for awareness was present in EEs (46%), who are currently not eligible to take the examination. The interest for the examination reached almost 100% in all groups (Fig. 1a). Physicians from Albania, Israel or Northern Africa also expressed their interest in catching up with European standards.

The majority of the participants rated their national education level lower than European standards, no differences were found between the three groups (Fig. 1b). Self-rating of language abilities revealed that oral skills were regarded lower than written skills in all groups. Whilst language skills were not perfect in any of the groups, particularly EEs were concerned about their oral language capability (Fig. 1c). The evaluation of factors, which may discourage colleagues from taking the examination, included a self-rating for sufficient knowledge of the examination language (English), the examination fee (600€) and the usage of books recommended for preparation by the EBN (Goetz CG: Textbook of Clinical Neurology, 3rd edn. Saunders-Elsevier 2007; Ropper AH, Samuels MA: Adams and Victor’s Principles of Neurology, 9th edn. McGraw-Hill 2009) (Fig. 1d–e).

The majority of the participants indicated the examination fee as overvalued. Whilst the necessity of a fee was accepted, the suggestions for an alternative amount were in the range of one-third of the current fee was accepted, the suggestions for an alternative examination fee as overvalued. Whilst the necessity of a fee was accepted, the suggestions for an alternative examination fee as overvalued. Whilst the necessity of a fee was accepted, the suggestions for an alternative examination fee as overvalued. Whilst the necessity of a fee was accepted, the suggestions for an alternative examination fee as overvalued. Whilst the necessity of a fee was accepted, the suggestions for an alternative examination fee as overvalued. Whilst the necessity of a fee was accepted, the suggestions for an alternative examination fee as overvalued. Whilst the necessity of a fee was accepted, the suggestions for an alternative examination fee as overvalued. Whilst the necessity of a fee was accepted, the suggestions for an alternative examination fee as overvalued. Whilst the necessity of a fee was accepted, the suggestions for an alternative examination fee as overvalued. Whilst the necessity of a fee was accepted, the suggestions for an alternative examination fee as overvalued. Whilst the necessity of a fee was accepted, the suggestions for an alternative examination fee as overvalued.

Discussion

The efforts of the UEMS are directed at facilitating the free exchange of training and work of trainees and medical specialists between EU countries. This situation, in combination with large differences in requirements and length of training in neurology within the EU, stresses the importance of harmonization in training and certification within the EU [4]. The UEMS SEN/EBN examination is currently regarded as a mark of excellence with no legal standing and does not confer the right to practice neurology in the EU or elsewhere. The only exception is Austria, which has just announced the equivalent acceptance of the EBN examination for an evaluation period. Nonetheless, just 1 year after the launch of the examination, more than 50% of junior physicians from the EU/EEA were aware about the examination. Most importantly, our survey points at unanimous interest of junior colleagues in the examination. This can be regarded as an important signal towards national bodies, proving that young neurologists are eager to acquire European standards and take this challenge even in the context of an examination fee and necessity of additional preparation time. Similarly, in several other disciplines such as urology or ophthalmology several thousand physicians in the EU have taken the respective European board examination and this certificate has evolved to an asset to the individuals CV and portfolio. For instance, the UEMS urology examination was started in 1992 and more than 2300 urologists have passed since then [5]. However, whether the EBN examination will reach such honours and whether it can be an alternative to the national examination in the EU remain to be seen. In addition, the UEMS/EBN might consider to open the examination to neurologists from outside the EU under special conditions. This might be a potential chance not only for examinees from countries with lower educational standards than Europe to assess their knowledge but also to strengthen and restore the position of European neurology [6,7].

We identified several aspects, which currently detain junior neurologists from registering for the examination. This particularly concerns the examination fee, which does not show an adjustment to the economic situation of individual countries and income of physicians. We identified a restraint towards the examination procedure because of potential language barriers particularly amongst junior neurologists from EE. The oral part is expected to be a greater obstacle than the written part. Potential measures to overcome this issue might be the preparation with e-learning modules including teaching videos provided by the American Academy of Neurology (AAN, http://www.aan.com/go/elibrary).
To evaluate both language and neurology skills, a preliminary web-based test session may also be valuable. Important feedback regarding the recommended textbooks could be obtained. The textbooks used by European junior neurologists only rarely corresponded to the suggestions by the EBN, with only 43% EU/EEA and 40% EE neurologists using these books regularly. A future basis for preparation may also be provided by the e-learning platform currently under joint development by the ENS and EFNS [8]. Eventually, the participants took the challenge for the three sample questions and less than 1/3 of the participants rated the questions as difficult or very difficult. Whilst the region-specific differences (EEs found the questions most difficult) are of interest, we believe that for evaluating the difficulty of the questions a representative number of examinees who have taken the examination under real-life conditions should be interviewed.

Conclusions

To the best of our knowledge, this is the first survey on the opinion of junior neurologists regarding the EBN examination. There are several limitations for this study including the low number of participants and the insufficient representation of countries with same or higher education levels as the European standards. Yet, we believe that our results provide an important insight into current feeling of junior neurologists regarding the examination. Remarkably, there is substantial motivation of neurologists from the EU and even from outside to take the challenge of meeting European standards in neurology. Eventually, we have delineated several factors, which may be addressed in the future to increase participation and substantiate the significance of this examination. The future is bright, the future is European.

Acknowledgements

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Conflicts of interest

JS, MR and WS are current or previous office members of the EAYNT. WG is the president of the UEMS SEN/EBN, WS is the EAYNT/PWG delegate to the UEMS SEN/EBN.

Supporting Information

Additional Supporting Information may be found in the online version of this article:

Data S1 EFNS Academy 2010: Young Neurologists Survey.

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References