Is anaesthesia learnt in the most effective way? In the United Kingdom those entering training programmes will usually become either full-time specialists or general practitioners with an interest in anaesthesia in the hospital or the dental surgery. Much of the initial learning by trainees is by the apprenticeship system. In addition, some academic training is provided in the anaesthetic departments of the hospitals and in organized courses. These courses aim to assist trainees to obtain the relevant professional qualifications. However, the results of the Primary and Final F.F.A.R.C.S. examinations cast doubt on the adequacy of this part of the training programme. There is a widespread suspicion that the recent increases in the failure rates of both examinations result from an unjustifiable assumption by many that attendance at a course can be equated with preparedness.

Since the introduction of the present format of the examinations in 1969, on average in each year some 203 candidates pass the Primary and some 186 pass the Final examinations of the London Faculty, but the numbers attempting the examinations are increasing, so that the pass rate for the Primary has decreased from a peak of 45% in 1972 to 31% in 1976 and for the Final from 49% in 1969 to 34% in 1976. Thus increasing numbers of candidates are unable to meet the standards required by the Faculty. Why is this happening?

A recent symposium on teaching and communication in anaesthesia was organized by the Glasgow Departments of Anaesthesia. Professor Nisbet of the University Department of Education in Glasgow discussed the problem of how people learn. Essentially they have to work hard and effectively. The effectiveness of their work is improved by knowing what has to be learnt—by knowing the objectives of the study and by receiving feedback as to whether these objectives have been attained. (It seems that many trainee anaesthetists receive this feedback only at the examination.) The learning process is aided by the proper use of books, journals, lectures, tutorials, self-instruction methods such as tape-slide sequences, and discussion with colleagues. If academic training in anaesthesia is to improve, each trainee must recognize that much of what is offered in formal courses can only be a guide to further study and should not be regarded as specimen answers to examination questions.

Teachers of anaesthesia should also be aware of the learning processes although few will have had any training in educational methods. In the latest edition of her book on Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, Professor Ruth Beard of the Department of Educational Studies at Bradford University explores the possibilities for those involved in university and college education (Beard, 1976). Although directed mainly for those in full-time studies, much is of value to the anaesthetist. There is advice on the use of lectures, tutorials, practical classes, “teaching without teachers” and other techniques. But the main message is that training and assessment must be considered as a whole. Students must know the aims of any course and these may need to be broken down to a list of specific learning objectives. Teachers should select the best techniques available to ensure that the necessary knowledge of terminology, concepts, skills and attitudes is achieved. Both the student and the teacher need to know how well they are fulfilling these aims. Class examinations conducted at intervals during the courses may help. The results obtained in such tests could give the student and the teacher the information they need. Such monitoring should enable the student to decide, with advice, when he is prepared to undertake the formal examination.
Can these ideas be applied to anaesthetic training? The Faculties in London and Ireland do not publish a detailed syllabus for each examination. Hunter (1975), defending this policy, claims that a rigid syllabus would not allow candidates to be tested for their knowledge of the developments in anaesthesia. But this does not excuse an assessment of the main core of necessary knowledge. If all else fails this should be apparent from a study of past examination papers and teachers can be present at the oral examinations.

Trainees and teachers must establish what is expected of them. Each trainee must work using all the available resources and have some assessment of his progress. Were these aims to be achieved the pass rates for the professional qualifications would increase substantially.

John Norman

REFERENCES