

COMLEX Level 2 Performance Examination Overview

CHAPTER

1

ELIGIBILITY

Eligibility to take the COMLEX-USA Level 2 Performance Examination (COMLEX 2-PE) is determined by several criteria. First, the candidate must be currently enrolled at an osteopathic medical school. The school must be accredited by the American Osteopathic Association's Commission on Osteopathic College Accreditation. The candidate must also have completed the second year of medical school (MS-II) didactic curriculum and passed the COMLEX Level 1 examination. Candidates cannot take the COMLEX Level 2 examination without successful passage of Level 1. In addition, the dean of the candidate's medical school must give approval for the candidate to take the COMLEX 2-PE. There is no required order for taking the COMLEX Level 2 Cognitive Evaluation (COMLEX 2-CE) or the COMLEX 2-PE. Candidates may take either exam first as long as they meet all eligibility criteria. Applicants who have already graduated from an accredited osteopathic medical school can apply by submitting a copy of their diploma.^{1p3} Table 1–1 provides a quick reference checklist for COMLEX 2-PE eligibility.

NBOME WEBSITE

Candidates can find all information regarding the COMLEX examination process at the National Board of Osteopathic Medical Examiners (NBOME) web site at www.nbome.org. This is also the route for candidate registration, scheduling, and payment of funds required to take the examination. Candidates cannot schedule their exam until the dean of the candidate's school advises NBOME that the candidate is eligible. Candidates can schedule the COMLEX 2-PE up to 1 year prior to the actual test date. Because available slots fill quickly, candidates should request a test date well in advance. This is especially true if completion of the COMLEX-USA Level 2-PE is required by the candidate's school prior to graduation; in such cases, candidates should schedule the test before January 31 of the year of their predicted graduation.^{1p7}

SPECIAL ACCOMMODATIONS

Special accommodations may be available for any candidate with a disability defined by the Americans with Disabilities Act. Candidates must submit applications for accommodations in writing by filling out the correct form, which can be found on the NBOME web site (www.nbome.org).^{1p8}

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Table 1–1 COMLEX 2-PE Eligibility Checklist

Item	✓
Are you attending an osteopathic medical school?	
Is the medical school accredited by the American Osteopathic Association?	
Have you completed your second year of medical school (MS-II)?	
Have you passed the COMLEX Level 1 Examination?	
Has the dean of your school given approval for you to take the COMLEX Level 2-PE examination?	

TESTING SITE

There is currently only one examination site, the National Center for Clinical Skills Testing, located at 101 West Elm Street, Conshohocken, Pennsylvania, which is in the Philadelphia area. Each candidate must travel to the site to complete the COMLEX 2-PE.^{1p16}

CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT

Candidates who take any component of the COMLEX examination are bound by the Candidate Confidentiality Agreement. This agreement, which the candidate must sign, states that all information regarding content of the examination is confidential and cannot be discussed or relayed to any other individual in any manner, including in spoken or printed form. Penalties for violating this agreement can be severe and include the possibility of invalidation and failing of the examination.^{1p5}

In this regard, this author made no attempt to obtain content of case samples of the COMLEX 2-PE from prior candidates. However, through literature searches of publications concerning the development of this evaluation tool and publicly available descriptions of the COMLEX 2-PE available from NBOME, this author was able to surmise likely case topics and develop case-based scenarios that likely mimic those that candidates can expect to encounter on the practical examination.

STRUCTURE OF THE EXAM

Candidates complete the COMLEX 2-PE examination in 1 day. Each candidate encounters 12 standardized patients in individual clinical scenarios.²

The clinical encounters are timed so that the candidate has 14 minutes to gather the history and perform a problem-specific examination. Then, through problem solving, the candidate must provide the patient with a diagnosis, safely perform osteopathic manipulative medicine (OMM) if appropriate, and develop a treatment plan based on the proposed diagnosis. Following the 14-minute encounter, candidates receive an additional 9 minutes to write a subjective, objective, assessment, plan (SOAP) note documenting the encounter.

The purpose of the examination is to prove the osteopathic medical candidate's competency and ability to safely perform assessment, diagnosis, and treatment using clinical skills. By doing so, licensing bodies have a tool to document public safety.

Clinical skills are defined as patient-centered skills and are evaluated through the candidate's interaction with the standardized patient. Areas evaluated are broken down into two components termed domains: the Biomedical/Biomechanical domain, and the Humanistic domain. These domains are briefly overviewed in the following subsections and discussed in detail in later chapters.

The Biomedical/Biomechanical Domain

The Biomedical/Biomechanical domain concerns medical history taking and physical examination skills, osteopathic manipulative medicine, and the ability to develop a differential diagnosis and associated treatment plan.²

The candidate's ability to document the encounter properly is also evaluated. Following the standardized patient encounter, the student immediately documents in the standard SOAP note format

Table 1–2 Components of the Biomedical/Biomechanical Domain

History taking	Obtaining historical data related to the patient's chief complaint
Physical examination	Problem-specific exam dictated by the history
Assessment	Listing differential diagnoses in order of likelihood
Plan	Developing a treatment plan for the proposed diagnoses
Osteopathic manipulation	Educating about and performing osteopathic manipulative medicine if appropriate
Documentation	Recording the encounter through the standard SOAP note

Table 1–3 Components of the Humanistic Domain

Communication skills	Verbal clarity and appropriateness, appropriate nonverbal communication
Interpersonal skills	Demonstration of empathy, helpfulness, and understanding
Professionalism	Dress, demeanor, and clinical competence

the history taken and examination performed including findings, assessment, plans, and manipulation performed. (The SOAP note is discussed in detail in Chapter 7.) A summary of the components of the Biomedical/Biomechanical domain are shown in Table 1–2.

Immediately following each encounter, by completing a checklist the standardized patients evaluate the candidate's history-taking and physical examination skills. The history-taking evaluation assesses whether the candidate asked the appropriate questions based on the patient's chief complaint as well as questions that should have arisen from answers encountered during the patient interview.

The physical examination evaluation contains those parts of the problem-specific examination that the candidate should perform based on the clues obtained in the history. Because time does not allow for comprehensive examinations, this is a focused physical examination based on the chief complaint and likely diagnosis developed during the history taking. Candidates must not only perform the exam, they must perform the exam with technical proficiency.²

For example, if a candidate performs auscultation of the lungs but listens only at one level anteriorly or listens through a gown instead of on bare skin, the candidate is not given credit for that part of the examination.

Osteopathic physicians evaluate and grade the candidate's OMM techniques and SOAP note documentation. Osteopathic manipulation is not appropriate for all cases and should not be performed in every scenario.

Humanistic Domain

The standardized patient also completes the Humanistic domain evaluation immediately following the encounter and rates the candidate's competency to communicate in English with the patient and ability to display clarity, professionalism, and empathy.² Table 1–3 highlights the components of the Humanistic domain.

GRADING

Percentage grades are derived for each domain of the COMLEX 2-PE. The Biomedical/Biomechanical domain score is composed of adding two thirds of the clinical skills percentage score (incurred through the history taking, physical examination, assessment, plan, and manipulation) with one third of the percentage score obtained from the written SOAP note documentation.²

The Humanistic domain score is composed of the standardized patient evaluation of the candidate's communication and relationship skills at each of the 12 patient encounters. Assessment areas include verbal skills, listening skills, instructive skills, respect, empathy, and professionalism. Each area is assigned a grade from 1 to 9 with 9 being the best possible score. The final score for the individual encounter is the mean of each of the preceding six areas.²

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An overall score is then determined by averaging the 12 case encounters for each domain thereby providing a final score for the Biomedical/Biomechanical and Humanistic domains. This averaging allows the candidate to compensate for substandard performance in one area with consistently superior performance in other areas. For example, if a candidate fails to recognize that manipulation was appropriate for a sinusitis case, the candidate may fail that encounter's Biomedical/Biomechanical domain; however, if the candidate's performance in that domain receives higher grades in other cases, the deficiency is offset.²

Grading of the COMLEX 2-PE is pass or fail only. To pass the examination, the candidate must pass both the Biomedical/Biomechanical and Humanistic domains.^{1p12}

When a candidate fails the examination, additional information is provided via a grade report that breaks down the scoring in each domain.³ With this breakdown, the candidate can identify in which domain he or she lacks proficiency. For example, the candidate may be deemed proficient in documenting the history and performing the physical exam, but the candidate may have performed poorly on the osteopathic manipulative treatment (OMT) and SOAP note documentation.

AVAILABLE RESOURCES

The greatest resource available for candidates to familiarize themselves with the policies, procedures, and structure of the COMLEX 2-PE is the NBOME web site (www.nbome.org). Prior to the examination, candidates should take every opportunity to review the *Bulletin of Information*, COMLEX 2-PE Orientation Guide, and the DVD Instructional Program. These highly useful resources provide detailed information on eligibility and examination format. The DVD demonstrates the standardized patient clinical encounter and offers helpful hints such as what equipment is found in the examination rooms. No candidate should miss the opportunity to review this information.

Following is a list of COMLEX 2-PE preparation resources that can be found at the NBOME web site:

- Bulletin of Information
- PE Orientation Guide
- PE Instructional Video

At the NBOME web site, the “For Candidates” tab provides a list of links in the left column. Under the “Testing” link, candidates can click the “COMLEX L2 PE” link to access the preceding resources.

The *Bulletin of Information* is labeled “BOI Document.” The “NCCST Info” arrow provides links to the PE Orientation Guide and the PE Instructional Video, which is labeled “Instr Prog DVD.”

REFERENCES

1. National Board of Osteopathic Medical Examiners. *Bulletin of Information 2009–2010*. Available at: <http://nbome.org/docs/comlexBOI.pdf>. Accessed November 27, 2008.
2. Gimpel JR, Boulet JR, Errichetti AM. Evaluating the clinical skills of osteopathic medical candidates. *JAOA*. June 2003;103:268–271.
3. National Board of Osteopathic Medical Examiners. Level 2 Performance Evaluation (PE) FAQ. Available at: <http://nbome.org/exams-faqpe.asp>. Accessed November 27, 2008.