

EBO

European Board of Ophthalmology

EBO EXAM SUCCESS

EBOD examination underlines growing impact of European ophthalmic education

by Dermot McGrath in Paris



EBO Awards Ceremony – Successful Spanish, Greek and German Candidates

These are busy times indeed for the European Board of Ophthalmology (EBO), which has been active on a number of fronts in recent months.

In May, the highest number of 310 candidates from 27 European countries came to Paris to sit the EBO Diploma (EBOD) examinations, a figure which continues the steadily upward trend of recent years for this prestigious qualification. In addition to the candidates, over 180 examiners travelled from all over Europe to make up the panel of skilled, multilingual EBO examiners, all experts in their various fields.

Held every year in Paris, the EBOD examination is designed to assess the knowledge and clinical skills requisite to the delivery of a high standard of ophthalmic care both in hospitals and in independent clinical practices.

For Marko Hawlina MD, PhD, FEBO, current president of EBO, this year's examinations provided grounds for satisfaction for a number of reasons.

"Firstly, it was heartening to see so many candidates come to Paris despite all the problems with the current financial climate and worries about travel disruptions with the volcanic ash. Another source of satisfaction is that the standard seems to have gone up somewhat in recent years and the knowledge of the candidates has improved because more candidates were successful this year than in previous years," he said.

As in previous years, high attendance was expected from France, Germany, Switzerland, Belgium, The Netherlands and other countries of northern Europe. A particularly encouraging trend this time around was the increased number of candidates from Spain, Greece, Italy and the countries of eastern Europe, a development that the EBO hopes is a sign of further growth in the near future. From the EBO perspective, the ideal scenario would be to have the EBO examination accepted as a national knowledge test and then for national authorities to add their own formal requirements to enable candidates to attain full accreditation to become specialists in their chosen country, said Prof Hawlina.

"The EBO diploma has always been deemed as a badge of quality for these countries, but not every country has yet included the EBO exam in their qualification system. It would be good if all the residents who passed the exam in Paris could have their efforts acknowledged, at least in part, by their national examining bodies. France, Switzerland, Belgium, The Netherlands, Slovenia and most recently, Austria, have already adopted this approach and have

accepted the EBO exam as the equivalent to their own examination, which is something we would like to see spread to other countries as well," he said.

Prof Hawlina noted that the higher pass rate in 2010 was achieved despite concerns in some quarters about the introduction of negative marking for the first time in the multiple choice question part of the written examination.

"It was interesting to note that negative marking did not actually impact on the pass rate, so we can conclude that the higher discriminating power of the exam was not achieved at the expense of the pass rate. The idea behind negative marking is to ensure that the answers are based on knowledge rather than wild guessing, although understandably there was a fear among the candidates that this would reduce their chance of passing the exam. This has not turned out to be the case, as not less but more knowledgeable ones passed," he said.

Prof Hawlina added that the relatively high pass rate is in part understandable because the demanding eligibility criteria set by the EBO national delegates and programme directors raise the basic knowledge platform of the EBO exam compared to other similar exams.

Another major plus from this year's EBO gathering in Paris was the influx of new examiners who have decided to play their part in advancing the EBO's goal of harmonising the standards of ophthalmology education and training across the continent.

"I think the best indication we have that this European atmosphere of collaboration is very much alive is that we had many more applications from examiners than last year. This allowed us to put in place a system where some of the senior examiners could oversee the exam procedures and ensure that everything was conducted to the highest standards, and the new younger examiners could sit in and observe and see how the process works and what will be required of them in the future. It's a positive mentoring process, so there was some education to the examiners side as well this time and many of them left with really good impressions and are very enthusiastic to return next year," he said. Prof Hawlina also acknowledged the support of the French Society of Ophthalmology (SFO) which offered logistical support throughout the exam and also Laboratoires Thea, whose support helped to ensure that EBOD was also a pleasant social event in the best traditions of French hospitality.

Looking to the future, Prof Hawlina said that the immediate goals of the EBO are to consolidate the work achieved over the past few years, promoting the

EBO examination and strengthening the EBO's work in areas such as residents' and teachers' observership grants, continuing medical education and expanding the current network of certified training centres and hospitals.

In November, the EBO is scheduled to hold its Extraordinary General Assembly at which elections to the EBO Board will take place.

Prof Hawlina's term of office as EBO president comes to an end in December 2010, when he will be succeeded by Mr Wagih Aclimandos, a consultant ophthalmic surgeon at King's College Hospital, London.

However, while Prof Hawlina will be stepping down from the role of commander-in-chief of the EBO, he will still remain actively involved in the Board's activities and will be able to devote more time to particular EBO activities where he feels he can make a difference.

"After my mandate ends, I become past-president and will sit on the EBO Board for another two years. I have offered support to help in every aspect of the EBO's work, most notably in trying to accelerate the harmonisation of training in eastern Europe, which has been a longstanding interest of mine," he said.

One obvious outlet for Prof Hawlina's experience will be the new Workgroup for Eastern European Education (WEEE) set up by the EBO in January this year, and composed of Board members interested in helping to build bridges between eastern and western Europe.

Looking back over his term as president, Prof Hawlina said that most of the objectives that had been set in the organisation's strategic plan at the time of taking office have been advanced considerably in the past two years.

In this regard, Prof Hawlina highlighted the assistance of Agenda in setting up a new user-friendly and informative website and streamlining applications and other procedures. He also underlined the important contribution of Danny Mathysen, MSc. in Biomedical Sciences from the Department of Ophthalmology of Antwerp University Hospital, and the Speedwell company from Cambridge, UK, in further professionalising the examination process.

The EBO has now adopted the ICO curriculum as the basis of development of its syllabus, said Prof Hawlina. "Using the platform of the ICO curriculum, we are now in the process of ascertaining European opinion as to what procedures need to be learnt during the residency period in order to construct our new logbook. This will set the baseline upon which we will be able to start constructing recommendations for different medical and surgical fellowships. We have also accredited many didactic courses by the EBO through our ENET programme and also recommended the core source books for candidates to study from for EBOD examination and where the MCQ questions are expected to stem from," he said.

A future initiative will be to further upgrade the profile and position of education in European teaching centres and create an award to appreciate the efforts of outstanding European educators, added to the existing Alan Ridgway award for the highest scoring candidate in the MCQ exam at EBOD.

"It was particularly gratifying that Alan Ridgway, former head of the MCQ system, was present this year to give this award," Prof Hawlina said.

He added that while some goals always take more time than originally anticipated, this was perfectly normal in a voluntary organisation.

"We are all very busy professionals, and the EBO work is extra time that people invest voluntarily in the organisation so we are already more than grateful for all the efforts that they make to raise the standards in the EBO and spread the message," he said.

A particular source of pride is the recent addition of several new training centres to the growing pan-European network of EBO accredited facilities.

"We have four new centres in France and four in Denmark and new applications have also been received from countries such as Lithuania, Italy and Switzerland. The goal is to have at least one accredited training centre in every European country and we hope we will keep this momentum going to build a strong, truly representative training network across Europe," he concluded.



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Marko Hawlina MD, PhD, FEBO
President of EBO

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