

Royal College of Pathologists

Examination regulations - 2024

FORENSIC PATHOLOGY

These regulations must be read in conjunction with the *Regulations and Guidelines – College examinations for Membership and Diplomas*.

Candidates wishing to pursue a career in forensic pathology should do so with a sound background in histopathology, such that they have a satisfactory knowledge of disease mechanisms and systemic pathology, and a more than adequate familiarity with autopsy techniques and microscopy.

Two examination routes are possible:

- Part 1 FRCPath in histopathology followed by Part 2 in forensic pathology
- Parts 1 and 2 FRCPath in histopathology followed by the Diploma in forensic pathology.

ENTRY & TRAINING REQUIREMENTS

There is no specific timing for entry to the examination. Candidates should obtain guidance from their educational supervisor as to when to sit the examination. Planning should take into account planned CCT date (where applicable) but candidates should apply only when they are ready. Some general guidance is given below, but apart from the sequence in which the examinations can be sat is not intended to be prescriptive.

Whichever examination route is chosen, at the end of any training programme candidates should have acquired a broad knowledge of medicolegal systems and legal aspects of clinical practice, familiarity in performing post-mortem examinations in a wide range of natural and non-natural deaths, including specialist techniques and related investigations, and an awareness of the responsibilities involved in dealing with suspicious deaths and of giving evidence in courts.

Part 1

Trainees will normally require two years' experience of specialty training in Histopathology in order to achieve the standard required to pass the Part 1 Examination.

Part 2

Candidates with the Part 1 examination in general histopathology wishing to take the Part 2 examination in forensic pathology must have been training for at least 4½ years, of which 3½ must have been in the specialist/specialty registrar grade and to have included two years of forensic pathology training in an approved programme. Prior to completion of training (end of Stage D), candidates must also have had at least three months' experience in each of neuropathology and paediatric pathology with two months of each on formal attachment. It is expected that candidates will have completed the majority of this training prior to attempting the Part 2 examination.

STRUCTURE AND FORMAT OF THE EXAMINATION

Part 1

Candidates will take the general histopathology Part 1 MCQ/EMQ (see the Histopathology regulations for further details).

Part 2

The Part 2 examination will comprise a submission of a casebook and a practical/oral examination.

Casebook

Candidates should also read the section on 'Guidance for candidates undertaking written options for the Part 2 examination' in the ***Regulations and Guidelines – College examinations for Membership and Diplomas***.

Candidates must submit a casebook of 10 medico-legal cases, covering a wide spectrum of forensic work.

The cases proposed by the candidate, including a brief outline of the case circumstance and cause/manner of death must be submitted to the College for approval in sufficient time to allow consideration.

The range of cases should be such that the examiner has confidence that the candidate has had sufficient exposure to, and has knowledge of, the range of cases that a Forensic Pathologist may face e.g. most types of trauma are included whether accidental, suicidal or homicidal but with a significant proportion of suspicious deaths.

The finished project must be submitted at least four months before the entry closing date (which are in January and July) of the Part 2 examination for which the candidate wishes to enter. The College cannot guarantee that an amended submission (if required) will be marked in time for the candidate to undertake the examination if it is submitted later than this.

The casebook should have a total word count of 20,000 plus/minus 10%, not including references or diagrams. The word count must be stated and the candidate may lose marks if outwith these limits.

The candidate should demonstrate an ability to formulate good quality reports with well-reasoned discussions in the context of key literature. A key element of the casebook is demonstration of the ability to draw appropriate conclusions for a case and therefore the candidate should not merely copy that of a consultant in an original report. The case need not necessarily include a full PM report but the essential/salient points should be present to allow the examiner to determine that appropriate conclusions and cause of death have been reached.

Acknowledging differing practices in the country and that some trainees may not have the opportunity to personally conduct homicide or suspicious death autopsies, 'involvement' may include only limited examination including special techniques but may be only attendance through the autopsy examination and at the scene where possible. It is expected however that in a number of cases the candidate will have themselves undertaken the PM examination. The candidate should make clear what the extent of their involvement was for each case. The candidate may comment on e.g. any procedures not done.

Candidates will not be allowed to sit the practical exam until the casebook has been awarded a pass (A) by the examiners. Candidates submitting a satisfactory casebook but failing to achieve the required standard in the practical exam will not be required to submit a new casebook at any subsequent attempt at the examination.

Practical and oral examination

The practical examination is designed to assess the competence of candidates to practice forensic pathology independently. Candidates should ensure that they are fully aware of and have covered the forensic pathology curriculum published by the College.

The examination comprises the following elements which will normally take place over a period of 2 ½ days. In most instances the first component will be the written essays and with an example timetable as follows:

Day 1:	PM – Written exam
Day 2:	AM - Autopsy component PM – Microscopy
Day 3:	AM - Long cases PM – Viva/oral

Instances may necessitate a different timetable but you will receive notification of the intended schedule before the dates, with contact details and information as to where to attend.

Each section of the examination assesses a distinct set of professional skills, each essential to the performance of an independent medical practitioner in forensic histopathology. Candidates must therefore pass each section of the examination in a single sitting.

Should a candidate make one or more egregious errors that are of medico-legal significance and undermine the examiners' confidence that the candidate has reached the stage of independent consultant practice in forensic histopathology, the College's egregious errors policy will be followed (see section 9.5 of the examinations Regulations and Guidelines).

Written

This will comprise 6 questions, all of which should be answered and with a duration of 3 hours. Whilst there may be an occasional question that is in a short written answer format the questions will primarily be essay format. In addition to Forensic pathology knowledge and practice, questions may be included on e.g. service provision, governance and quality assurance and relevant legal issues.

Autopsy

The total duration of 3 hours will include 30mins for examiner demonstration and discussion i.e., a maximum of 2 ½ hours for the autopsy itself. This 2 ½ hours will also include completion of an Autopsy Findings sheet to include main findings, proposed further investigations and cause of death but the candidate will not be expected to complete a PM 'write up' or report.

Candidates may be asked to undertake special techniques/examinations **if** appropriate to the case; if a candidate during their examination thinks any such technique may be appropriate then they can suggest it but must seek approval from

the examiner before undertaking it. They may however be asked to describe how they would undertake any specialist technique/examination.

Candidates should not at any time take any photographs or images during the examination; if for some reason it is thought that something should be recorded in such a way then approval must be sought and given by an examiner and an approved device used.

Microscopy

This will normally comprise 20 cases with a duration of 3 hours. The material may cover any aspect of post-mortem practice appropriate to Forensic pathology. Whilst in most instances there will be one section per case there may be occasional questions with more than one tissue section and the number of cases may then be decreased.

Each candidate will have their own set of slides. Digital reporting will not be used.

Long cases

This will comprise 2-4 questions, all of which should be answered and with a duration of 3 hours. This may include completion of autopsy report conclusions based on report and/or photographs, interpretation of other expert reports including Toxicology or examination/reporting on specimens/photographs including bones.

Viva/oral

This is likely to include the candidate being asked questions based on photographs or other material but may include other areas relevant to Forensic practice e.g. ethical, legal or management issues.

Diploma in Forensic Pathology

This qualification is intended for those who have pursued the full FRCPATH in histopathology and who then wish to specialise in forensic pathology. The requirements are similar to those for the Part 2 in forensic pathology.

The examination may be taken after a period of training, which has included a minimum of two years' substantial involvement in Coronial/Fiscal autopsy practice, of which at least 18 months must have been in forensic pathology departments approved by the College. Candidates must also have had at least three months' experience in each of neuropathology and paediatric pathology, although the qualifications in regard to this time period, outlined in the Part 2 FRCPATH above, would equally apply here.

The examination has two components.

- **Casebook:** a casebook of 10 medicolegal cases, the purpose and format of which is exactly the same as for the Part 2 FRCPATH. Candidates submitting a satisfactory casebook but failing to achieve the required standard in other components of the examination will not be required to submit a new casebook at any subsequent attempt at the examination.
- **Written and Practical examination:** the same format as for Part 2 FRCPATH, to comprise a written paper, autopsy, microscopy, case reports, gross specimens and oral.

Candidates must pass each component of the examination in a single sitting. Should a candidate make one or more egregious errors that are of medico-legal significance and undermine the examiners' confidence that the candidate has reached the stage of independent consultant practice in forensic histopathology, the College's egregious errors policy will be followed (see section 9.5 of the examinations Regulations and Guidelines).

TIMING OF THE EXAMINATIONS

The Part 2 and Diploma examinations will be offered twice a year in Spring and Autumn.

Examinations Department
The Royal College of Pathologists
November 2023