Working as a Standardized Patient (SP) for the USMLE®
Step 2 CS Exam

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- What types of physical examinations are done?
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Step 2 Clinical Skills (CS) is the clinical skills component of the United States Medical Licensing Examination® (USMLE®), a three-step examination program for medical licensure in the United States. Step 2 CS requires medical students and graduates to interact with "standardized patients" (SPs), people trained to portray real patients with medical problems. Examinees are tested on their ability to gather information from patients, perform physical examinations, and communicate findings to patients and colleagues.

The Educational Commission for Foreign Medical Graduates (ECFMG®), which administered a similar exam to graduates of international medical schools, collaborates with the National Board of Medical Examiners® (NBME®), one of the parent organizations of the USMLE, in the development and administration of Step 2 CS. Step 2 CS is administered at several regional Clinical Skills Evaluation Centers (CSECs). Currently, there are test centers in Atlanta, Chicago, Los Angeles, Houston, and Philadelphia. As part of its collaboration with NBME, ECFMG hires and trains SPs for the exam.

Step 2 CS protects the safety of the American health care consumer by asking physicians in training to meet a minimum national standard for clinical and communication skills. SPs play a central role in this important exam. However, working as an SP is not a typical job, and many people have questions about this type of work. Some of
the most common questions follow. The answers to these questions will help you decide whether working as an SP for this exam is right for you.

**Who are these doctors you are testing?**

We test doctors who want to become residents or fellows in U.S. programs of graduate medical education or training. Doctors enter these advanced training programs after graduating from medical school. The doctors we test come from medical schools in the United States and other countries. Some examinees have graduated from medical school, while others are medical school students. You may also encounter other medical school students and graduates and experienced, licensed U.S. doctors, who are used to conduct research and development for the exam. The examinees have varying levels of experience. Some may be inexperienced in performing physical examinations, and some may be very proficient.

**What types of physical examinations are done?**

They are common examinations that you might have as a real patient in a doctor's office. For example, examinees may listen to your heart and lungs with a stethoscope; press on your abdomen, looking for tenderness or swelling; look into your eyes, ears, and throat; take your blood pressure; assess your muscle strength; check your reflexes; or check your pulses. Female breast examinations are not permitted. However, examinees may ask female SPs to loosen or move their bras to listen to the heart. Occasionally, some exposure of the breast may occur, and a portion of the breast area might be touched. Examinees are urged to use a drape during the examination, but not all are skilled at this. The doctors do not perform rectal examinations, genital examinations (including "pelvic" examinations), or corneal reflex tests. They are told that these examinations are not allowed. None of the examinations involve taking blood or other samples. You would not be given any drugs.

**Will I need to get undressed?**

Yes. SPs wear hospital gowns so that the examinees can perform physical examinations. You would keep your underwear on underneath the gown. In some cases, the examinee may check certain pulses underneath the patient's underwear, but the underwear does not need to be removed. Female SPs may be asked to loosen or move their bras for some examinations, such as listening to the heart, and they are expected to do so. They may even need to remove their bras completely, but SPs are trained to handle this sensitive situation. Since breast, genital, and rectal examinations are not permitted, there is no reason for total nudity.

**Is it safe?**

Yes. There is no reason for anyone to do anything that might be harmful. The examinations are very basic and do not cause any harm to SPs. At most, there may be some brief discomfort. If something unexpected happened and you were worried about being harmed, you could simply stop the simulation and leave the room; however, there is no reason to expect this. All encounters are recorded and are observable via video monitors as they happen, in part for the safety of the SPs. ECFMG carries standard insurance coverage for employees in the event of injury as a result of work. Remember, you would not really be sick, just simulating someone who is. It wouldn't matter whether or not the examinee is correct in his/her diagnosis or plans for further tests and evaluation.

**Is this like being a research subject?**

No. Medical research subjects are given drugs or are placed on certain diets in order to study their reactions. We are testing the medical students or graduates (the examinees), not the patients. We use SPs to simulate situations for the examinees, typically: meeting a patient for the first time in a clinic or emergency department, interviewing the patient about his/her medical problem, and doing a physical examination. The examinees are evaluated on what they do during these encounters.
How do I know what to say when the doctor interviews me?

You would be trained to portray the patient we assign to you. We create a complete history for SPs to learn. This includes the reason the patient is coming to see the doctor, the patient's past medical history, and social details such as the patient's job, family, and activities. We also describe the patient's emotional state when seeing the doctor. Through our training process, you would learn to become that person, and to speak to the doctor just as that patient would. We would also show you how to move like the patient, and how to react to the physical examination. For example, if you were portraying someone with back pain, we would show you where it would hurt and what you could or could not do because of your bad back.

That sounds like acting. Do I have to be an actor?

No. Some SPs are trained and experienced actors, but most are not. You can be a very good SP without ever having been on stage or in a movie. There are some similarities to what actors do, but there are differences, too. The training you would receive is more important to your success as an SP than your past job experience.

I am an actor. This should be easy for me—and good experience too.

While you may find it to be good experience, it will be much more difficult than working from a script or within dramatic improvisational outlines, and you may find it frustrating. This work has nothing to do with finding dramatic moments or playing to an audience. It has everything to do with disciplining yourself within the needs of the patient's case and the exam. It can be very repetitive, since exactly the same simulation must be done for every examinee. Some actors find it difficult or annoying, and we cannot use them. Others do fine work as SPs. Remember, too, that the cases must remain confidential. You would not be permitted to use the material in any public or private performance or to include your patient's name on your resume.

Do the doctors know we aren't real patients?

Yes. All examinees know that they are dealing with SPs in simulated clinical encounters. However, in performing their interviews and physical examinations, they are instructed to behave just as they would with real patients.

Why do you need SPs? Why can't you just use real patients?

Some things are better done with SPs. For example, one SP can be seen by many different doctors. With each doctor, SPs can behave as though they were seeing a doctor for the first time about their problem. This allows all doctors the same chance to show their skills, allowing a fair exam for everyone. That's why the patient is referred to as "standardized."

Do I have to decide whether the doctor passes the test?

No. It would not be fair for SPs to decide whether an examinee has passed or failed. SPs record the events of the encounters on a checklist and evaluate the examinees on their interpersonal skills and their proficiency in spoken English. These marks are used, along with other indicators of the examinee's performance, in determining the examinee's final score.

How often would I work?

That is uncertain. The work is part-time, as needed. We schedule SPs based on examinee demand for the exam, the need for the case that SPs are trained for, and their availability to work. Due to these variables, it is not possible for us to guarantee a minimum number of hours.
During our busiest months, we may operate up to seven days a week with both day (8:00 a.m. - 3:00 p.m.) and afternoon/evening (3:00 p.m. - 10:00 p.m.) shifts. You would need to be available for these hours, though not every day. In the busiest months, all SPs are expected to work at least some weekend and evening shifts when needed. The more you are available at the times we need you, the more likely you are to work. Once you are scheduled, you must work that shift. Applicants must have day-time availability, and priority is given to applicants who have at least three day shifts per week available on a regular basis.

How do you choose who will be hired?

This is not a typical job. We need people who understand the unusual requirements of this program.

- You should be comfortable with your own health and in dealing with health care professionals. You must be completely comfortable with undergoing repeated physical examinations.
- You must have good English reading and verbal communications skills.
- You must have good recall and the ability to concentrate.
- You must not have any biases against anyone based on their gender, race, religion, national origin, physical characteristics, and so forth.
- You must be reliable and punctual.
- You must always maintain confidentiality, even if you go on to work for another institution. You must sign an agreement that you will not discuss, share, or disclose any written or web-based material you see in the center or anything you learn or memorize about this exam as a result of your employment with ECFMG. Failure to follow this policy may result in dismissal and prosecution.
- You must be able to pass a background check for security purposes.
- You must not be related to anyone currently working in the same department at the same test center.
- You must not be a potential examinee for the USMLE Step 2 CS exam.

I've had a couple of health problems in the past. Can I still be an SP?

Probably, yes, if you are suitable in every other way. Everyone has a medical history. Sometimes, it does not matter if the SP has a condition that the patient they are portraying does not have. Sometimes an SP would be excluded from portraying a particular case on this basis; however, it is possible that these SPs could be assigned to another suitable case.

Do I need to know a lot about medicine?

No. We would teach you what you do need to know. We actually prefer people who have not had medical training, and we do not normally hire medical professionals, nor do we hire medical students or graduates who may be required to take Step 2 CS. The patients you would portray are not medical professionals. Most SPs find that they learn quite a lot from the work and enjoy this. However, we remind them to act like they know less than they really do, in order to keep the simulations realistic.

I've been an SP before for other organizations. Would I be able to work for ECFMG?

Your previous experience may be useful, but there is no guarantee that we will hire you. You may find some aspects of the work, such as the physical examinations, different from what you experienced before and not to your liking. Once you commit to working as an SP for ECFMG, you would not be allowed to work as an SP for any medical school program or clinical skills preparation course involving medical students (both allopathic and osteopathic), since those same students take this exam. You must sign an agreement to that effect. For other programs or tests (such as the National Board of Osteopathic Medical Exam), you may be allowed to work, but you would need to inform your supervisor.
How much does the job pay?

Starting pay for training is $16 per hour. Once you have successfully completed the full training and are scheduled as an "approved for live" SP, your supervisor will raise your hourly rate to $18.50 per hour. Training hours vary but you can expect to work approximately 100 to 150 hours over two to four months in order to complete the training process. At centers with no free, local parking, there is also a public transportation allowance. All wages and allowances are subject to usual payroll deductions.

I think I could do this job; it sounds easy enough.

This job is not easy, and it is not for everyone. You would be in a hospital gown during your entire exam shift. Smoking is not permitted in the building, and you must remain in the building throughout your shift, including during lunch and breaks. This job requires intense concentration while you are being interviewed and examined by the examinee. You must be able to respond exactly as the real patient would, and only as that patient would. You must be able to maintain not only the patient's character but also simulate his/her physical condition during a fifteen-minute encounter with the examinee and be able to do this many times in succession without any changes. After the encounter, you must be able to remember and record what the examinee did. You must be able to respond quickly to feedback from training staff who give you guidance about improving your job performance. Being an SP is hard work, and we demand a high level of job performance.

I'm still interested. What do I do next?

To begin the application process, you must complete our on-line application.

If you have read and understood the information in this SP brochure and are interested in applying for a position as a standardized patient, please close this browser window, and then click the button "Apply for Job".

Depending on our needs, we will call you to attend an application session. We may then arrange an interview and physical assessment. You will also be required to sign an agreement of confidentiality and a release and consent form stating that you understand the nature of the work and agree to it. We will then schedule training sessions in consultation with you. In addition to case training, you will be required to attend about 30 hours of other training and an "SP Final Exam." All training and exam time is paid. You will need to be available for all day-time training and the evening SP Final Exam.

Even if we do not use you right away, we will keep your application on file for one year for our future needs.

Thank you for your interest in our program.

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[Last updated: October 8, 2012]