



College of Intensive Care Medicine
of Australia and New Zealand
ABN: 16 134 292 103



A FAMILY MEMBERS PERSPECTIVE ON THE CICM EXAMS

This document aims to provide a brief overview to the families of doctors that are about to embark on their CICM exams, from someone that isn't medical. This is my version of some of the things you may encounter over the coming months, an insight into some of the simple things that I never really considered may become difficult, and some tips for you to consider in the coming months to hopefully help you keep the train on (or at least close to) the tracks. It's a long tiring road, and that's from a couple that don't have the added responsibilities of children, so our journey was no doubt less difficult than it will be for some, but it was rarely easy.

When you are the partner of a doctor there comes a point when you have finally gotten used to the odd shifts, missed events and weekend work; only to have your partner come home and tell you they need to start studying for their primary exam. No worries you think, just another exam, they got through heaps of those at University, this should be a breeze. Despite not really knowing what is in store, you know that they are not sitting for more than 12 months, 'That's heaps of time!' you exclaim, figuring life as 'normal' will just go on. This is the naïve talk of a rookie.

Together my wife and I have made it through med school, the CICM first part exam (on the second go) and then finally the CICM second part exam. Sure, she did all the hard study, but we were for all intents and purpose a team. I'm not saying we were a great team to start off with (mostly my fault) but we eventually got match fit. As someone not in the medical field, I had little idea what to expect and even less idea how much time, pressure and stress the whole process would cause. After the University exams were finished, I thought the hard part (and stress) was over and the rest was just a bit of work experience, followed by a bit of specialisation and then she'd be an [*insert whatever specialty I thought she might have been going to be at the time here*]. Well, not quite.

When the CICM first part exam loomed on the horizon, I had a vague idea what was coming. I was thinking work, study, sit exam and life pretty much going on as normal. I was totally unprepared for the number of hours of study recommended in the curriculum. At least 12 months of working full time and studying full time, with a little bit of family and friend time squeezed in around eating and sleeping.

It doesn't take long to figure out that it's not going to be an easy time. We did have a couple of things working to our advantage, we don't have children, we've had to spend time apart before and were quite used to doing our own things and having to plan time with each other. It also helped that I'm quite an introvert and really do enjoy a bit of time on my own, so there was a little less pressure on her to make time for me in the exam schedule.

Consider making some aspects of the study plan together. Factor in work, study and life and begin to wrap your head around the fact that that's going to be the order of priority for the next

12 months. Sit down and do some reading with them, have a look at their curriculum and see the amount of work they need to cover in the time available. Then go back to the study plan and think about fitting that in around work. Encourage allocating free time into the study plan, a dinner or a breakfast here and there will likely be the highlight of the week.

A word of warning, although a positive attitude is a must, you need to be realistic and contemplate the prospect of them failing and you both all having to go through it again. It's not pleasant but it's a very real thing because on average only about 60% of people get through each sitting, and typically doctor folk are not accustomed to failing anything.

My wife failed the first part exam on her first attempt and it was devastating. Mostly for her because it was the first time she'd failed at anything, but it was also hard for me. Knowing that we'd have to go through it again and in the back of my mind realising that after this there was still another set of exams to come and we could be on this merry-go-round for some time. I felt for her, after all the sacrifices to life, friendships, relationships and time, she was now going to have get back on her feet and face it all again. It didn't help that there was an ongoing cancer battle within the family that was adding a whole new level of stress into the situation. In the end, we took some time off the study, put it behind us and waited for her to be ready to commit to the entire process again. She ended up sitting the exam again 12 months later and with the benefit of experience and a little more time she nailed it. Don't be afraid of giving them the advice to stop and take a step back, wait an extra 6 months to sit again, what is 6 months in the span of a career?

Given all that we had learnt from the attempts at the first part exam, we had a much easier time with the fellowship exam. Although we didn't exactly make it easy on ourselves, with my wife moving interstate and me staying at home for work. We made it work by having regular visits and dedicating non-study time during those visits. In fact, I think she may have found living away easier, the guilt of not spending time with her family was less and there was always a visit to look forward to and drive her study. Thankfully she went on to pass the second part exam on the first attempt and the light at the end of the tunnel grew very bright.

We went through this process a couple of years ago and some things have changed. There probably were support groups and resources available at the time, but I never really sought them out, but if going it alone isn't your thing the CICM website has some pointers for your partner on how to engage their family and there's a welfare document for trainees on how to look after themselves and their relationships and keep some sort of balance in their life. I recommend that you read them both together. It will really highlight to you both the challenge ahead. Reading them in hindsight was one of those lightbulb moments "Oh. Now I understand."

Planning your everyday life is important! The simplest things can become stress points in your relationship. We struggled initially with simple things like dinners, because I'm not very organised, nor am I a kitchen person and while we shared the cooking, she did most of the planning. So, when time was scarce, the meal planning ended and that only served to add stress come dinner, caused by my indecision and a lack of planning. I could happily eat cereal if I couldn't be bothered planning anything for dinner, turns out that's not ideal for everyone. Then we discovered home delivered frozen meals and by the time the second part exam arrived, we were on the meal boxes. Five dinners a week, dropped off at the front door, without

needing any substantial time at the shops and (the real winner for me) very little planning. For the remainder of the week we either ate simply, went out with friends or had a date night, which left me plenty of time to gripe that she never did any of the laundry (and still doesn't).

Having read back through this, you're most likely sitting there thinking this all revolves around them. Well, to some extent it does, they've invested more than half their life to get to this point and at some stage you've voted to get on the bandwagon for the remainder of their journey. I'm not medical, and while my work may throw up some challenges or stress, it is rarely about life and death decisions. Similarly, while I require ongoing 'professional development' it isn't really study based, and it has never felt like everything I've dedicated so much of my life and career to hinged on the passing of two exams.

To sum up, my 5 top tips for surviving the bumpy exam road are.

- Make sure time together is allocated in the study plan.
- Plan your everyday life – outsource wherever you can to give you more time, meals, cleaning, washing.
- Learn what you can about the exam, it will help you better understand the process and why all the study needs to be done.
- Don't underestimate the impact of these exams on your life, I attended many family and social events solo, so much so that new friends thought my wife was a figment of my imagination.
- Get a hobby, one that can occupy you for many hours – I found solace in the swim, bike and run. Other suggestions include golf, artwork or an extensive home renovation to keep you occupied.

The CICM Welfare SIG would like to thank our member and her husband for providing their perspective of their family life through the CICM Exam preparation.