

Prevalence of test accommodations for the Medical Council of Canada Qualifying Exam Part I, 2013-2021

Prévalence des accommodements pour l'examen d'aptitude du Conseil médical du Canada, partie I, 2013-2021

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Abstract

Introduction: Previous articles have highlighted the laborious process of acquiring disability accommodations in medical education. We endeavoured to characterize the trends of test accommodations on the MCCQE Part I.

Methods: Data was obtained from the Medical Council of Canada on the number of applicants who attained test accommodations on the MCCQE Part I between 2013 and 2021. The number of test takers for the same period was obtained from the Medical Council of Canada's Annual Technical Reports; this data was not publicly available for 2013, 2014, or 2021. Prevalence rates and graphs were produced.

Results: The number of test takers who attained test accommodations ranged from 35 to 126 between 2013 and 2021. The percentage of test takers who attained test accommodations ranged from 0.89% to 2.01% between 2015 and 2020. Per correspondence with the Medical Council of Canada, no applicant who provided all required documentation was denied test accommodations during this period.

Discussion: The number and rate of test takers attaining test accommodations on the MCCQE Part I have increased substantially during this period. It is unclear whether this increase is due to greater rates of students with disabilities, or a reduction in stigma around using test accommodations.

Résumé

Introduction : Des articles publiés antérieurement ont mis en évidence le processus laborieux d'obtention d'accommodements pour les personnes handicapées dans le cadre de la formation en médecine. Nous explorons les tendances en matière d'accommodements pour l'examen d'aptitude du Conseil médical du Canada (EACMC), partie I.

Méthodes : Le Conseil médical du Canada nous a communiqué le nombre de candidats qui ont obtenu des accommodements pour l'EACMC, partie I, entre 2013 et 2021. Le nombre de candidats ayant passé l'examen au cours de la même période a été obtenu en consultant les rapports techniques annuels du Conseil médical du Canada; les données pour 2013, 2014 et 2021 n'étaient pas accessibles au public. Nous présentons des taux de prévalence et des graphiques.

Résultats : Le nombre de candidats ayant bénéficié d'accommodements a varié de 35 à 126 entre 2013 et 2021. Le pourcentage de ces candidats a varié de 0,89 % à 2,01 % entre 2015 et 2020. Selon la correspondance du Conseil médical du Canada, aucun candidat ayant fourni les documents requis ne s'est vu refuser l'accommodement d'examen au cours de cette période.

Discussion : Le nombre et le taux de candidats bénéficiant d'accommodements pour l'EACMC, partie I, ont considérablement augmenté au cours de la période visée. On ne sait pas si cette hausse est due à une augmentation du nombre d'étudiants handicapés ou à une réduction de la stigmatisation liée au recours aux accommodements d'examen.

Introduction

Applicants with disabilities can apply for test accommodations on the Medical Council of Canada's Qualifying Examination Part I (MCCQE Part I).^{1,2} Currently, applicants must provide: a list of their medical equipment/assistive devices; a history of previously granted accommodations; a personal statement describing their functional limitations and associated accommodations; and a medical professional's letter explaining their functional limitations, accommodation needs, test specific test accommodations, and justification for them; if more than two years old, they require additional documentation re-confirming the disability and highlighting changes to accommodation needs.³ Further, they also require copies of supporting documentation from their academic institution, clinical training program or other testing organization.² After a prolonged decision-making period, applicants with disabilities receiving accommodations must book their exam through a US-based call centre with limited operational hours, while able-bodied test-takers book their exam via an online portal or by phone.

Acquiring disability accommodations in medical education is a laborious process.⁴ Meeks et al. noted that among US medical students nearly 1 in 5 students who needed accommodations did not request them.⁵ Only 52% of students applying for disability accommodation on the United States Medical Licensing Exam (USMLE) Part I received accommodation.⁶ Of the students denied accommodations, 51% experienced delays entering the next phase of their program because of the denial.⁶ Ultimately, 76% of the students denied accommodations took the examination without accommodations of which 32% received a failing score and 3% withdrew or were dismissed by their program due to the failing score.⁶

Canadian disabled health professionals frequently complete additional work to dissuade misconceptions about their role and raise awareness to have their own accommodation needs met.⁷ This work is often unacknowledged and contributes to a sense of isolation and alienation.⁷

In the context of this previous work, we sought to characterize the temporal trend of test accommodations on the MCCQE Part I.

Data Mining

The Medical Council of Canada (MCC) provided data on the number of applicants who attained test accommodations on the MCCQE Part I between 2013 and 2021. The total number of test-takers, including Canadian and international medical graduates, was available in the MCC's Annual Technical Reports;⁸⁻¹² data were unavailable for 2013, 2014, or 2021.

Seven hundred and twenty-three test-takers attained accommodations between 2013 and 2021. Per correspondence with the MCC, all applicants who provided the required documentation received accommodations during this period.¹³ No data were available for applications that did not submit all required documentation. Between 2015 and 2020, 35,481 applicants took the MCCQE Part I. Note that individuals could be represented in more than one year if they initially failed the examination and retook it in a subsequent year.

The percentage of test-takers attaining accommodations ranged from 0.89% to 2.01% between 2015 and 2020. Compared to the 2015 rate, the percentage of applicants attaining test accommodations increased by 226% (Figure 1).

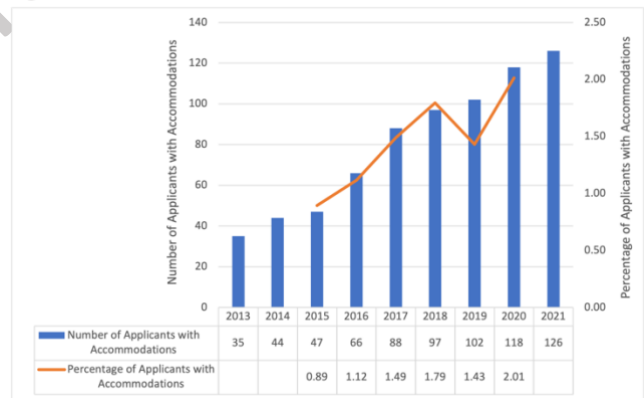


Figure 1. Test Accommodations for the MCCQE Part I, 2013-2021

Discussion

The number of test-takers receiving test accommodations has increased rapidly and consistently between 2013 and 2021.

Canadian data for medical trainees with disabilities are not only hard to access but are also lacking in quality (14). Based on our results, there appear to be more medical students with disabilities requesting test accommodations. However, it is unclear if this increase is attributable to increasing numbers of trainees with disabilities, an increased rate of disability acquisition during medical

training, and/or reduction in stigma around disability/accommodations.

In 2017, prevalence of self-disclosed disability in the Canadian population ranged from 13% among those aged 15 to 24 years to 47% over 75 years old.¹⁵ Prevalence estimates of disability in MCCQE Part 1 test-takers ranged between 0.89% and 2.01%. Therefore, individuals with disabilities are underrepresented in MCCQE Part I test-takers (and likely Canadian medical education environments more broadly).

The prevalence of disability in the MCCQE Part I data may be inappropriate for extrapolation. Some disabilities exist that do not necessitate written exam accommodations, despite impacting clinical training and requiring accommodations in clinical environments. Similarly, not all students requesting test accommodations self-identify as disabled, due to personal choice, limited scope of their impairment (e.g. learning disability only apparent in testing/exam environments) or limited duration of their impairment (e.g. broken arm requiring a cast).

Given the documentation necessary to obtain accommodation, the labor and involvement in the medical system required to obtain this documentation, there may be applicants who began this process but were unable or unwilling to complete it. The burden of documentation may exceed what is reasonably required according to the Ontario Human Rights Commission recommendations for best practices.¹⁶ Further, it is not clear that the accommodations provided for the students were sufficient for their needs or able to be accessed during their exam.

Further research exploring the disabilities being accommodated on this exam and the number of applicants who began but did not complete the test accommodation request process is necessary. This work would elucidate whether the accommodation process is a barrier for students to apply for exam accommodations. It is also important to explore the pass rates of disabled applicants compared to non-disabled applicants to determine if applicants have equivalent examination experiences. Qualitative work exploring the experience of applicants requesting accommodations and whether the accommodations provided met their needs would also be valuable.

Conflicts of Interest: None

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