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Pharmacy Law Brief: Pharmacy Law Exam for Licensure

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Question: When I graduated from pharmacy school quite some time ago, I took a pharmacy law exam as part of the licensure process, and I'm fairly certain that this examination was composed locally by the members and staff of the Board of Pharmacy. The focus was principally on local state laws. I understand that has changed quite a bit and that now there is a national pharmacy law exam for those seeking licensure. Can you describe what contemporary graduates will be facing?

Response: You are correct – there have been substantial changes since you (and I) went through this portion of the licensure process. The National Association of Boards of Pharmacy administers the Multistate Pharmacy Jurisprudence Examination (MPJE) to accompany the North American Pharmacist Licensure Examination (NAPLEX) in a two pronged approach to assessing the readiness of nascent pharmacists to become licensed professionals. While you may have taken a paper-and-pencil examination back then, the MPJE, and the NAPLEX, is a computer based exam.

The exam consists of 90 questions of which 75 “count”, that is, the responses to those questions will be used to calculate the candidate's score. What about the other 15 questions? Those are test items being evaluated for possible future use. It should be noted, however, that the examinee does not know which are the “real” questions and which are included for validation and assessment for possible future use.

How are the test items vetted to assure their relevance to practice and propriety for use in assessment of knowledge and competence? Initial preparation of possible questions is done by those designated as “Item Writers.” Those who devise the questions to be considered are drawn from the ranks of academicians who teach in this area (Your author pleads guilty! I was an Item Writer way back when the MPJE was first devised decades ago.) as well as from among officials affiliated with administrative and regulatory agencies of relevance to pharmacy such as officials with boards of pharmacy. There is an MPJE Review Committee that also weighs in on whether a particular question has clarity and addresses a relevant area of legal knowledge for pharmacists. A final step involves review of the proposed

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questions by the state board of pharmacy of the jurisdiction where exam will be used. That step assures that unique elements of the pharmacy laws of that state are adequately addressed.

Because the exam administered in State A has questions specific to the law of that jurisdiction a recent graduate who takes the MPJE for State A and who then later decides to also pursue licensure in State B will need to take a separate examination for State B. These scores cannot be transferred from state to state as can be done with NAPLEX exam scores.

Having a computer-based administration of the exam means that the examination can be assembled using “adaptive technology.” This means that the upcoming questions to be posed to the examinee are selected based on how that individual responded to prior questions. This is designed to enhance the precision of the examination based on the test-taker's performance on prior questions. One outcome of this process is that each pharmacy graduate sitting for the exam receives a quite different, perhaps even unique, test. Test administrators then use something known as “item response theory” to assure that the various versions of the exam being administered were equitable. Another prominent national, even international, exam that uses this computer adaptive technology approach is the

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Graduate Record Examination taken by those aspiring to attend graduate school.

The NABP publishes competency statements to guide development of the test and to inform the test taker about the exam. NABP states that these competency statements “offer important information about the knowledge, judgment and skills” on which the applicant will be assessed.

How does one prepare for this exam? NABP points to “formal education, training, practical experience and self-study” as all contributing to position the applicant well.

The exam is divided into three major areas, with the assigned weight noted:

Area 1: Pharmacy Practice — 84 percent of the test

Area 2: Licensure, Registration, Certification and Operational requirements — 13 percent of the test

Area 3: Regulatory Structure and Terms — 3 percent of the test

Compiling and administering an examination like this is a massive undertaking. NABP is to be congratulated for taking the lead in bringing validity and reliability to this important step in the licensure process.