Examiners' comments – Feedback to Candidates

March 2023

This feedback gives general points to support candidates preparing for each section of the exam in the future. Comments are intended to provide helpful guidance rather than be prescriptive. Feedback is based on comments received from all the examiners who marked the March 2023 sitting, and therefore covers all papers and questions. Comments from the Chair of Examiners are also included. These indicate general points to support candidates preparing for the exam in future sittings.

All questions included in the March exam were marked according to pre-agreed mark schemes.

Candidates should be aware that mark schemes will always be used with discretion by examiners, so that answers that do not fully fit the model answer or mark schemes are judged in terms of their relevance and overall fit with the question asked.

Candidates are encouraged to review the Frequently Asked Questions on the Faculty website (particularly the section that deals with preparing for the DFPH examination) and pay particular attention to the examination syllabus.

Summary statistics for the March 2023 sitting are also published on the FPH website

Paper I

Q1 & Q2: Performance was uneven over the parts of Q1, which related to interpretation of data and corresponding plots, but was generally good. Candidates on the whole performed better at the descriptive aspects of the task than its interpretive aspects. In contrast, performance on Q2, while also uneven over its parts, was less good. Though the first half of the question was satisfactorily addressed by most candidates, it was clear that many (though not most) candidates misinterpreted the second half relating to analysis of specific forms of data; indeed, even where candidates did interpret it correctly, performance was poor. Because of these misinterpretations, the Board of Examiners removed six marks from Q2. A more general point is that candidates should practice interpretation of statistical results in words, rather than relying on copying the estimate of effect presented in a question.

Q3 & Q4: Candidates performed unevenly on Q3 as well, and were often not familiar with the breadth of key epidemiological concepts this question demanded despite the concepts from social epidemiology in this question being prominent in the syllabus. In contrast, responses to Q4, which focused on population health trends, were generally of a good standard. Where appropriate, candidates should expand the breadth of their answers to reflect local, national and international factors driving trends in health indicators.

Q5 & Q6: Candidates who performed best on Q5 and Q6, both of which related to routine data and demographic trends, were able to relate key epidemiological concepts to the specific question context instead of merely repeating them without regard to application. This was especially apparent on Q6, which tested a number of fundamental concepts relating to health indicators. A strategy candidates should avoid is 'throwing everything' at a question, as muddled or clearly incorrect aspects of an answer alongside correct elements undermine confidence.

Q7 & Q8: Candidates generally answered Q7 well, but performed less well on Q8. Both questions related to fundamental sociological concepts as these pertain to health. A key discriminant between high-scoring and low-scoring answers was the presence of a structure that reflected knowledge of sociological principles. As with other questions, demonstrating application beyond mere recall was important to achieve a higher mark.

Q9 & Q10: Candidates also performed well on Q9 and Q10, which related to healthcare public health and the management of healthcare organisations. As above, demonstrating application of principles and theories led to higher marks. Candidates are reminded to answer questions fully; e.g. if three points are requested, three points should be provided for full marks.

Paper IIA

Candidates understood questions well, and performed to a good standard on the critical appraisal task. In this 'longer form' section of the paper, candidates are advised to attend to the mark allocation as a guide to the balance of content. Candidates are also reminded that public health principles should be used to contextualise and explain answers; e.g. merely reporting paper findings would not have been enough to satisfy examiners as to the public health knowledge being tested.

Paper IIB

Performance on Paper IIB was generally of a good standard. However, candidates struggled with interpretation of some statistical techniques that are core to the syllabus. As in Paper I, a strategy of 'throwing everything' at a question to give multiple conflicting explanations did not provide confidence in candidates' understanding. As with any sitting of Paper IIB, candidates should be suitability adept at undertaking the relevant calculations needed to answer the questions. Related to prior points about interpretation of statistical results in words, candidates are reminded to be precise in their use of statistical terminology in the syllabus (e.g. probability, likelihood and proportion have distinct meanings).