



SUPPORTING A REQUEST FOR REASONABLE ADJUSTMENTS IN EXAMS FOR HEALTHCARE PROFESSIONALS

BACKGROUND

People who stammer may be disadvantaged in scenario based healthcare exams, often called OSCEs (Objective Structured Clinical Examinations). The short time limits in many OSCEs can prevent people who stammer from saying everything they need to say. Also, misunderstanding of stammering and prejudices against those who stammer do exist, and examiners may be more likely to (incorrectly) view candidates who stammer as unsure or less competent than fluent speakers. In addition, people who stammer may find the exam situation particularly challenging as the high stakes, the observers, the actors, and typical exam nervousness can all make stammering more frequent or intense.

For these reasons and more, it can be difficult for people who stammer to show examiners what they are capable of within OSCEs.

Discrimination against stammering – related to both how the exam is set up and how it is marked – is covered by the Equality Act (Great Britain) and the Disability Discrimination Act (Northern Ireland). This applies where (as is very often the case) the stammering meets the legal definition of 'disability'. This gives people who stammer the legal right to request adjustments to exam procedures so that their clinical skills and competencies can be evaluated fairly. Such adjustments are known as 'reasonable adjustments'.

Disclaimer: This document provides a general guide and should not be used as a substitute for legal advice.

The guidance is produced by [STAMMA](#) and the [NHS Stammering Network](#).

We will continue to develop and refine this document based on individuals' experiences. We'd love to hear how you find this guidance and how your request for adjustments was received by the examining body. Please let us know at employmentsupport@stamma.org.

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HOW CAN YOU HELP?

Most examining bodies require some sort of certification or 'evidence' of the 'disability'. A letter or report from a professional (this may be a Speech & Language Therapist, a psychologist, GP, occupational health professional, etc.) will commonly be accepted as this evidence.

You can use the guidance below, alongside the Sample Letters/Reports in Appendix 1 and the *Reasonable Adjustments Report Template* in Appendix 2, to create a report to support the candidate's request for reasonable adjustments.

The report can include the following sections:

- Introduction to the request and stammering's relevance to the Equality Act and the Disability Discrimination Act
- Background information about stammering
- Information about the candidate's pattern of stammering
- How the exam situation disadvantages this candidate relative to their fluent peers
- The reasonable adjustments being requested
- Where to seek further information or support

You're trying to get all of this onto a maximum of 2 sides of A4 is possible, so that it is an accessible, practical document!

Note that, where the candidate is likely to sit a series of similar examinations over a period, they may appreciate having a single report that can be used repeatedly. Others may prefer the report to be specific to the exam as this can ensure the content is as up-to-date and relevant as possible whenever the candidate is seeking reasonable adjustments.

WHAT TO INCLUDE IN THE REPORT

Introduction: Organisations are often unsure of whether stammering can legally be regarded as a disability or not. It can. And you can make this clear in your introduction.

Background information about stammering: As stammering is often misunderstood, an introduction to stammering is necessary. An example of a general introduction to stammering has been provided in the sample reports in Appendix 1 and in the template in Appendix 2. These can be amended as you wish.

The candidate's pattern of stammering: See sample reports in Appendix 1. Information regarding the candidate's personal experience of stammering can be drawn from conversation and information from the individual, supplemented by observation and assessment where it's useful. It may be relevant to include some or all the following:

- What examiners might see or hear when the candidate stammers
- How they deal with moments of stammering (e.g. using physical effort to push the words out, swapping for alternative words, using fillers such as 'um' and 'ah' to help give a run-up to the word, saying less than they might do otherwise, introducing pauses, consciously slowing speech rate, etc.)
- External factors that influence their speech (e.g. having time vs. being rushed, group size, fatigue, being observed or assessed, speaking within a fixed time limit)
- The potential discriminatory impact of the exam situation and stammering (e.g., being misperceived as nervous or unsure of their knowledge)

The Exam: Many candidates who stammer find they stammer more under exam conditions than they do in their everyday medical professional roles. The candidate is dealing with typical exam pressures AND their stammering AND the fact that they may be stammering more than usual AND stammering stigma/discrimination. It's important to help the examining body understand where it is the exam procedures which are creating additional challenges.

You can see examples of the ways in which exam procedures can disadvantage candidates who stammer in the sample letters/reports in Appendix 1. Note that the details should always be tailored to the individual and ideally to the specific exam procedures, and taken from discussion with the candidate. For example, candidates who stammer may be disadvantaged relative to both fluent speakers and to the daily workplace situation if their stammering increases or changes because:

- The interactions are being filmed
- There are observers present
- They are roleplaying opposite actors
- They are required to use very specific terminology or phrases
- They are under time pressure

Reasonable Adjustments: Adjustments should be tailored to the individual and aim to minimise the disadvantage. Here are some examples that people who stammer have requested previously:

- Prior to the exam, examiners and actors to be given information about stammering in general, the individual candidate's particular pattern of stammering, and advice on appropriate ways listeners can respond
- Additional time for each clinical scenario (specify the additional time request)
- Breaks between scenarios
- Additional preparation time prior to scenarios (again specify how much time)
- Acceptance that candidate may substitute some specific terminology if those words are particularly difficult to say
- Opportunity to use the chat function during online examinations
- Spread the exam over more than one day
- Text to speech device

Reasonable adjustments are individual and should be discussed with the candidate. If there is a particular way in which the normal exam procedures put the candidate at a disadvantage, but together you can't think of a specific reasonable adjustment it is still worth telling the examining body of the disadvantage. That way, the examining body can consider what steps they can reasonably take.

Please note that this guidance is not exhaustive. Neither is it a substitute for legal advice. If you have questions, please contact us at help@stamma.org.

APPENDIX 1 – EXAMPLE LETTERS/REPORTS

EXAMPLE LETTER 1 - EXAM SPECIFIC

Live Well Speech Therapy
3 Gorton Crescent
Llandudno LD1 G7H

17th August 2022

Exams Team, Royal College of General Practitioners

Dear Exams Team,

Re: **Supporting letter – Reasonable adjustments request
Recorded Consultation Assessment (RCA)
Dr Madeleine Grantham**

Dr Grantham stammers and wishes to minimise any disadvantage relative to non-stammering candidates in her upcoming RCA. This letter is written in support of her request for reasonable adjustments to the assessment.

In my understanding, under the terms of the Equality Act (2010) and the Disability Discrimination Act, stammering is regarded as a disability when it impacts on daily activities. Stammering is a neurologically-based speech difference, but is highly variable and, for many, its extent can be influenced by external factors. Although the RCA is designed to give an insight into a doctor's skills, the recorded assessments differ from typical clinical consultations in several ways, including but not limited to:

- the fact that the interactions are being filmed
- the knowledge that these videos will be viewed and evaluated
- the heightened time pressure as anything that occurs after 12 minutes has passed will not be evaluated

It is probably fairly typical for RCA candidates to experience some nervousness and anxiety around these evaluations, but for candidates who stammer, this heightened emotional and physical state is likely to *increase* stammering. Indeed, Dr Grantham reports that she stammers more within these filmed consultations than within non-filmed consultations in her everyday clinical work. This increase in stammering has an impact on her ability to express herself verbally and demonstrate her skills and competence during the recorded consultations within the RCA.

Reasonable adjustments request

Dr Grantham wishes to request the following reasonable adjustments:

- Prior to the assessment, examiners to read a 1-page document with general information about stammering, as well as information about what they can expect to see and hear when Dr Grantham stammers (see Page 3 of this document*).
- A 25% increase in the assessed duration of each recording from 12-15 minutes, to allow for the increased rate of stammering during the recorded consultations.

We are grateful for your consideration of Dr Grantham's request for reasonable adjustments. Please contact us if we can provide further information or support.

Yours sincerely

Kai Huang
Speech & Language Therapist

INFORMATION FOR EXAMINERS

Re Dr Madeleine Grantham

About stammering

At least 1% of UK adults report that they stammer to varying degrees. Stammering is a neurologically-based speech difference which makes it physically hard to speak. Someone who stammers may repeat, prolong or get stuck on sounds or words. There might also be signs of visible tension as the person struggles to get a word out, or there may be circumlocution as the person works to find alternative words or phrases.

As stammering has little visibility in public life, fluent speakers often misunderstand why someone's speech contains these disruptions. Stammering is not a reflection of competence, skill or knowledge, and people who stammer are found in a wide range of careers, including those which require high level communication skills.

It is characteristic of stammering that its frequency and intensity fluctuate from day to day, but also from situation to situation. It is not *caused* by anxiety or nervousness, but these factors can make stammering more frequent.

About Dr Grantham's stammering

Dr Grantham is likely to:

- Take time at the beginning of the filmed consultations to explain to patients that she stammers so they know what to expect
- Make repetitions of parts of words, prolongations of sounds, or silent 'blocks' while she is working to say what she wants to say. These are features of stammering and should not be misinterpreted as hesitations or being unsure or unclear about what she wants to say. She may sometimes find alternative ways to explain something to reduce a moment of stammering or may stammer more when working through a moment of stammering on specific terminology.
- Sometimes close her eyes or look away when she is working to get through a moment of stammering. This does not indicate a disconnect between herself and the patient or a lack of knowledge, but is part of working through a moment of stammering.
- Speak more slowly and take additional pauses to reduce the frequency or intensity of stammering if this feels more comfortable for her.
- Stammer more in the RCA situation than she does during unfilmed, unobserved patient consultations

EXAMPLE LETTER 2 - GENERIC, MULTI-EXAMINATION LETTER

Live Well Speech Therapy
3 Gorton Crescent
Llandudno LD1 G7H

17th August 2022

Chief Examiner

Royal College of XXX

Dear [Name of Chief Examiner],

**Re: Request for reasonable adjustments
Juris Balodis**

This letter is written in support of Juris's request for reasonable adjustments in their professional examinations, including Objective Structured Clinical Examinations.

Juris has a stammer. Stammering is neurologically-based speech difference, but is highly variable and, for many, its extent can be influenced by external factors. Although designed to reflect clinical practice, the OSCEs scenarios differ from 'real life' in several ways, including but not limited to:

- the fact that it is an assessment,
- the presence of observers and evaluators,
- the interaction with actors taking the role of clients or patients.

It is probably fairly typical that the process generates nervousness and anxiety amongst most candidates, but for Juris this heightened emotional and physical state may increase their stammering. This dramatic increase in stammering has a significant impact on their ability to express themselves verbally and demonstrate their skills and competence within the examination setting.

We support Juris in their request for reasonable adjustments to minimise any disadvantage. Outlined below are the reasonable adjustments Juris is requesting, and they are also open to discussing other adjustments that you may feel appropriate.

- **A 10 minute break following every two stations**
Stammering at this level of intensity is exhausting which can have a detrimental effect on Juris's performance in the exam. These occasional breaks can, to some extent, mitigate this effect and reduce the disadvantage.
- **Extra time per station**
It will take Juris longer than fluent speakers to say what they want and need to say during the stations. A doubling of the available time during each scenario is requested so that they have time to complete the stations.
- **Receive a list of the stations and the order of stations 30 minutes before each session**
As the typical anxiety and nervousness associated with OSCEs has a direct impact on Juris's stammering, measures which help to reduce unpredictability can help to reduce anxiety and the impact of stammering.
- **Examiners & actors to receive information about stammering in general and its impact for Juris**
Research demonstrates that, although some features of stammering are well-recognised, others are not, and these are often misinterpreted as signs of uncertainty or lack of knowledge. These and other misconceptions are pervasive and have an impact on the way people who stammer are viewed and judged. Informing the examiners and actors about stammering can help to mitigate such negative effects and also help all those involved in the station feel more comfortable with stammering. We can provide this information in the form of a 1-page document or a brief video resource, whichever you feel is most appropriate.

We are grateful for your consideration of Juris's request for reasonable adjustments. Please contact us if we can provide further information or support.

Yours sincerely

Kai Huang

Speech & Language Therapist

INFORMATION ABOUT STAMMERING

Live Well Speech Therapy
3 Gorton Crescent
Llandudno LD1 G7H

17th August 2022

Examinations Team
University of XXX

Dear Examinations Team,

Re: **Test of Competence Part 2**
Harald Sørensen

Harald Sørensen has been in contact with STAMMA's helpline as he wishes to apply for reasonable adjustments to minimise any disadvantage relative to non-stammering candidates in his upcoming OSCEs as part of the nursing Test Of Competence.

Based on Harald's correspondence with the university, we understand that the examiners and actors involved in his circuit will be informed that Harald stammers and provided with basic information about stammering.

On the following page, I have included information which may be shared with the examiners and actors.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if I can be of further assistance.

Yours sincerely

Kai Huang
Speech & Language Therapist

Re: **Harald Sørensen**
Candidate Number XXX

General information about stammering

At least 1% of UK adults report that they stammer to varying degrees. Rooted in neurological differences, stammering can make it physically hard to speak. Someone who stammers may repeat, prolong or get stuck on sounds or words. There might also be signs of visible tension as the person works to get a word out, or there may be circumlocution as the person finds alternative words or phrases to express their meaning.

As stammering has little visibility in public life, fluent speakers often misunderstand why someone's speech contains these disruptions. Stammering is not a reflection of competence, skill or knowledge, and people who stammer are found in a wide range of careers, including those which require high level communication skills.

It is characteristic of stammering that its frequency and intensity fluctuate from day to day, but also from situation to situation. It is not *caused* by anxiety or nervousness, but these factors can increase stammering.

Information regarding Harald's experience of stammering

- Harald has explained that he experiences moments of stammering that are, usually, quite fleeting and have little impact on the flow of his speech. However, factors such as time pressure, observers, and the emotion associated with the 'high stakes' nature of the examination are likely to trigger an increase in stammering for many people who stammer. It is possible, therefore, that Harald will experience significantly more stammering within the OSCEs setting than he does within everyday clinical work.
- When Harald stammers, you may notice short 'blocks' where no sound comes out. accompanied by facial tension. Sometimes, he pushes through these moments of stammering, and you might see facial tension as he works to push the sound out. At other times he uses filler sounds such as 'um' and 'er', to try to release the physical tension and lead into the word he is trying to say. These blocks and filler sounds reflect moments of stammering and should not be misinterpreted as lack of knowledge or being 'unsure' of what he wants to say.
- When Harald is talking, it is helpful if you can give him the necessary time to speak. This is because interrupting or adding further 'pressure' within the examination context is likely to further increase stammering.

APPENDIX 2 – LETTER/REPORT TEMPLATE

Request for reasonable adjustments

[Name]
[Exam name & Candidate Number
if exam-specific]

Background

[Name] stammers and reports having done so since [give a rough guideline to when the person started stammering, e.g. "since childhood", "since 2010"]. In my understanding, under the terms of the Equality Act (2010), stammering is regarded as a disability when it impacts on daily activities, such as professional exams, and an example is included in the Act's supporting documentation.

This report outlines some general information about **stammering**, as well as specific information regarding [Name]'s stammering, ways in which the exam process may disadvantage the candidate, and the reasonable adjustments requested.

General information on stammering:

At least 1% of UK adults report that they stammer to varying degrees. For most people who stammer, stammering is a neurologically-based speech difference that makes it physically hard to speak. Someone who stammers may repeat, prolong, or get stuck on sounds or words. There might also be signs of visible effort as the person works to get a word out, or there may be circumlocution as the person works to find alternative words or phrases.

It is characteristic of stammering that its frequency and intensity fluctuate from day to day, but also from situation to situation. It is not *caused* by anxiety or nervousness, but these factors can make stammering more frequent and/or intense. Although designed to give an insight into a professional's skills, the *standard examination process* differs from typical, everyday professional encounters in several ways and may prevent a candidate who stammers from being able to demonstrate their skills and competence.

As stammering has little visibility in public life, fluent speakers often misunderstand why someone's speech contains these disruptions. Stammering is not a reflection of competence, skill or knowledge, and people who stammer are found in a wide range of careers, including those which require high level communication skills.

[Name]'s experience of stammering:

[insert description of candidate's pattern of stammering. Include some or all of the following where relevant:

- If the exam situation is likely to increase stammering, include that as a bullet point
- What examiners or observers might see and hear when the person stammers (e.g., sound prolongations, word repetitions, blocking)

The words 'the Equality Act (2010)' apply to England, Scotland and Wales. If Northern Ireland law may or does apply, add or substitute '[and] the Disability Discrimination Act (1995, Northern Ireland)', and delete the reference to examples in the Act's supporting documentation.

To meet the legal definition of disability, a person may need to have stammered for 12 months or more, although organisations don't always demand that this criteria is fulfilled. If this person hasn't been stammering for 12 months or more, there may still be good reason for reasonable adjustments, but you may need to amend the wording of this paragraph. Either exclude that section or, if it accords with your professional judgement, you could write something like, "In my opinion, the stammering could well continue for 12 months or more".

- What the person does to work through those moments of stammering (e.g. using physical effort to push the words out, swapping for alternative words, using fillers such as 'um' and 'ah' to help give a run-up to the word, saying less than they might do otherwise)
- What external factors (relevant to the examination) influence their stammer (e.g., being rushed, speaking in front of large groups, feeling fatigued, being observed or assessed, speaking within a fixed time limit)
- The potential discriminatory impact of the exam situation related to stammering (e.g., being misperceived as nervous or unsure their knowledge)]

Reasonable Adjustments

Where stammering impacts on an individual's ability to carry out activities such as professional exams via their standard procedures, it is legally regarded as a disability under the terms of the Equality Act, and reasonable adjustments to exam processes should be considered. Outlined below are the reasonable adjustments that [Name] is requesting to reduce the disadvantage. [Name] is open to discussion around further adjustments you may feel appropriate.

- [Insert reasonable adjustments as discussed with candidate]

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have questions regarding the content of this report. For further information about stammering and about reasonable adjustments for people who stammer, you may find STAMMA a useful resource. See www.stamma.org for further details or send an email to help@stamma.org.

Yours faithfully,

[Your name]
[Your affiliation]

The words 'the Equality Act' apply to England, Scotland and Wales. If Northern Ireland law may or does apply, add or substitute '[and] the Disability Discrimination Act (Northern Ireland)'.