

John Torpiano

Tell us a little about yourself?

My name is John Torpiano and I have been working as a consultant paediatric endocrinologist at Mater Dei Hospital in Malta since 2006. After graduating as a doctor in 1989, I specialised in paediatrics in Malta, and later trained in paediatric endocrinology in London. I have just completed the Diploma course in Endocrinology and Diabetes, and am currently planning to write my dissertation to, hopefully, obtain an MSc degree.

Why did you choose to study this course?

First of all, I am absolutely fascinated by the endocrine system and I thought it would be a good idea to enrol myself in a formal course that could help me renew and update my knowledge on the science of endocrinology. My background is paediatric endocrinology, and I felt that it would be interesting to learn about how endocrine disorders impact on adult patients. Apart from having the personal satisfaction of expanding my knowledge base to encompass all age-groups, I believed this course would help me better understand the problems facing patients with chronic endocrine disease as they grew older and, eventually, required transfer to the care of my colleagues practising in the adult endocrinology department. Other courses of study I had come across would have necessitated frequent travelling to and from the UK, as well frequent absences from my place of work. As a very busy, full-time, hospital clinician, this option was absolutely impractical. The Diploma Course at Queen Mary University of London utilises a system of distance-learning, on a robust platform (QMplus) that can be accessed from the comfort of one's home, and it perfectly suited my requirements.

How did you find the learning experience?

The diploma course is extremely well organised into 8 modules, each of which covers the background physiology, and the medical, surgical, biochemical and radiological issues of disorders affecting the various endocrine systems. Each module is supported by a large number of fully-profiled clinical cases, drawn from real-life scenarios, that can be studied in parallel to the actual taught material. The recorded lectures were extremely detailed, accompanied by handouts, and could be easily accessed at times of my choosing and convenience, so that I could very easily fit them around my work-day. The cherry on the cake were the online tutorials delivered in real time. The course is a fantastic system that utilises modern technology to deliver relevant and up-to-date clinical information to so many people who are geographically separated. It is also very adequately supported by the library that contains a large number of medical textbooks and journals, all easily accessible online at any time.

What were the highlights?

Perhaps, the most satisfying aspect was learning the essential skills of obtaining and then appraising clinical evidence. I have to admit that this had never been given much importance during my long years of medical training. Through repeated drilling over this course, I now feel very comfortable sifting through the reams of medical information and selecting that which directly and truly applies to the clinical problem at hand. I also thoroughly enjoyed the online tutorials because they involved a free discussion of clinical problems, and helped place all the taught theory into perspective.

What do you think you have gained from completing the course? How has it influenced your work or practice?

The course has given me renewed confidence in myself when dealing with endocrine problems. I now feel I am in a much better and secure situation while analysing a constellation of clinical features and organising a suitable investigative and management algorithm for my patients. The focus, throughout the course, on the sensitivity and specificity of the various biochemical and radiological investigations, that we so heavily rely on in our daily clinical work, has brought out their real value as well as their potential drawbacks. This has helped me improve the clinical service to my patients.

What advice would you give to a student considering this course?

Potential students need to make sure that they are willing to work hard and devote a substantial amount of time per week to their studies. Each module has been meticulously planned so that a new set of lectures is rolled out each week. The student would be expected to keep up with the pace and find time to read around the subject. The main textbook recommended for the course is really excellent, as it is both comprehensive and very easy to follow. However, added value can be obtained by looking up on various aspects of endocrine practice in other books or journals that can be easily accessed from the online library. I think it is important to start working seriously and diligently from the very first week of the course and to respect all deadlines. Although there is a considerable amount of material to cover, there is ample time during each module. If the course material is covered properly, the student will derive considerable personal satisfaction from the learning experience.