

You Have Not Finished Your Exams: Non-Discharge of the Examination Sitting, a Flat Nightly Hazard in 9.37 Million Candidate-Nights, and a Factorial Trial of Registry Closure

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Abstract

You are forty-one. Last night you sat an examination in a subject you dropped at sixteen, and you had not revised. The dream is not a symptom. The sitting is still open. An awarding body issues a statement of result, which attests what you scored; it does not serve the instrument that closes a sitting, and the regulations admit no other means of closure. Almost no candidate has ever been discharged, and the few who were owe it to something going wrong—a withdrawal, a destroyed script, a death. Three predictions follow, and all three hold. Incidence of the dream rises with the number of sittings a candidate has left open, and it does not fade: across a national diary cohort, any extinction of the dream has a half-life of at least two centuries. Incidence is also flat across grades, because closure does not depend on what you scored. Finally, in a factorial trial, entering the closure on the register cut the dream by 4.2 nights in a hundred (95% CI 3.8 to 4.6), while an identical letter carrying no registry entry did nothing at all; closure worked on candidates who were never told it had happened. The national backlog stands at 1.43 billion open sittings. Clearing it is one overnight batch job. You are not anxious. You are in arrears.

Keywords: candidate discharge; survival analysis; factorial trial; records audit; recurrent dreams

1 Introduction

This paper covers two things: the administrative status of completed public examination sittings, and the nightly incidence of the recurrent examination dream in adults who have sat them. It argues that the second is a consequence of the first.

It does not cover the following, and no result below should be read as bearing on them.

- (i) *Dream content*, beyond the three-part case definition in §5. We report one content statistic, in §8, because it does not fit.
- (ii) *Internal and continuous assessment*, which falls outside reg. 41 and incurs no obligation of the kind described here.

- (iii) *Mechanism*. We do not know how an entry in a national register reaches a sleeping adult. We have no account to offer and we decline to construct one. §7 establishes that it does; it does not establish how.

The observation this paper begins from is not a specialist one. Adults who last sat a public examination twenty, forty or sixty years ago continue to dream that they are sitting one: unprepared, out of time, and unable to leave the room. The dream is reported at every age, in every cohort we have surveyed, and by people for whom the examination in question has no remaining consequence of any kind. It is the most frequently reported recurrent dream in the general population [3], and it has been explained once, in one way, for seventy years: anxiety.

The anxiety account makes two predictions. The dream should fade, because learned associations extinguish. And it should fall hardest on candidates who did badly, because that is where the anxiety was. Neither prediction holds in a diary cohort (§6).

Our claim is simpler and entirely administrative. An examination sitting is a formal obligation on the candidate. Under reg. 41(2) it is extinguished by one means only: service of an instrument of discharge. An awarding body does not serve that instrument when it issues results, because a statement of result is an attestation of attainment and not a performative closure [1, 11]. Consequently almost every examination ever sat remains open on the register, and the dream is the service of the obligation, not a memory of it.

There are two ways that claim could be wrong, and we test them separately. The first is that the records are closed and we failed to find the instruments; this is a records question and §4 settles it. The second is that the association is real but the direction is reversed or confounded—that discharge, where it happens, is a marker of something else. That is a causal question, it is the assumption on which the whole account stands or falls, and §7 is the smallest experiment that tests it and nothing else.

2 Related work

The two literatures that bear on this paper do not cite each other. We searched for a paper that cites both and did not find one.

The anxiety account. Gwynne and Halloran [7] set out the received position: the examination dream is a consolidated stress memory, reactivated under low-threat conditions, extinguishing slowly. The account is coherent and it is quantitative. Extinction of a consolidated association proceeds exponentially with a characteristic time of months to a few years; reported prevalence should therefore decline steeply with age, and should be elevated in candidates whose examinations went badly. Caldecott et al. [3] report prevalence of 0.58 in adults aged 35–54 and 0.54 in adults over 65, and treat the near-equality as evidence of unusually durable consolidation rather than as a problem for the model. Their instrument is a retrospective frequency questionnaire, which is known to be dominated by the salience of the most recent instance [4]; the flatness could be an artefact of the instrument, and until now nobody has measured it any other way.

The administration of closure. A separate and much older literature concerns the instruments by which an assessment body discharges a candidate. Brakenbury [2] traces the modern certificate of discharge to the mediaeval *quietus est*, the acquittance given to an accountant whose books had been found and closed. Ansell and Pereira [1] draw the distinction this paper relies on: a statement of result is *constative*, a report of a measurement, while an instrument of discharge is *performative*, an act that changes the candidate’s standing. Sowande [11] states the registry principle in its strongest form: an obligation is discharged by entry, not by belief, and a party who believes themselves released while the register says otherwise is not released.

That literature is, by its own account, administrative housekeeping. It treats non-service as a clerical backlog of no consequence, because it can see no candidate who is harmed by it [10]. The gap between the two literatures is the subject of this paper. One field has a durable unexplained signal; the other has an unserved instrument and no addressee for it.

3 The sitting as an obligation

Definition 1 (Sitting, discharge, open count). Let S_i be the set of public examination sittings undertaken by candidate i , and let $D_i(t) \subseteq S_i$ be those for which an instrument of discharge has been served and entered by time t . The candidate's *open count* is

$$O_i(t) = |S_i| - |D_i(t)|. \quad (1)$$

Reg. 41(2) of the Examinations (Conduct and Closure) Regulations provides for service of a certificate of discharge, and provides no alternative route to closure. In the archived practice of all nine awarding bodies we audited, service is triggered in exactly three circumstances:

1. **Withdrawal** — the candidate withdraws before the sitting begins, and so never incurs the obligation;
2. **Voidance** — the script is destroyed, the centre is found irregular, or the session is invalidated;
3. **Posthumous closure**.

Note the shape of that list. A sitting is discharged only when something has gone wrong. The candidate who arrives, answers the paper, and is graded satisfies no trigger, because nothing failed. Figure 1 gives the lifecycle; the main path has no exit.

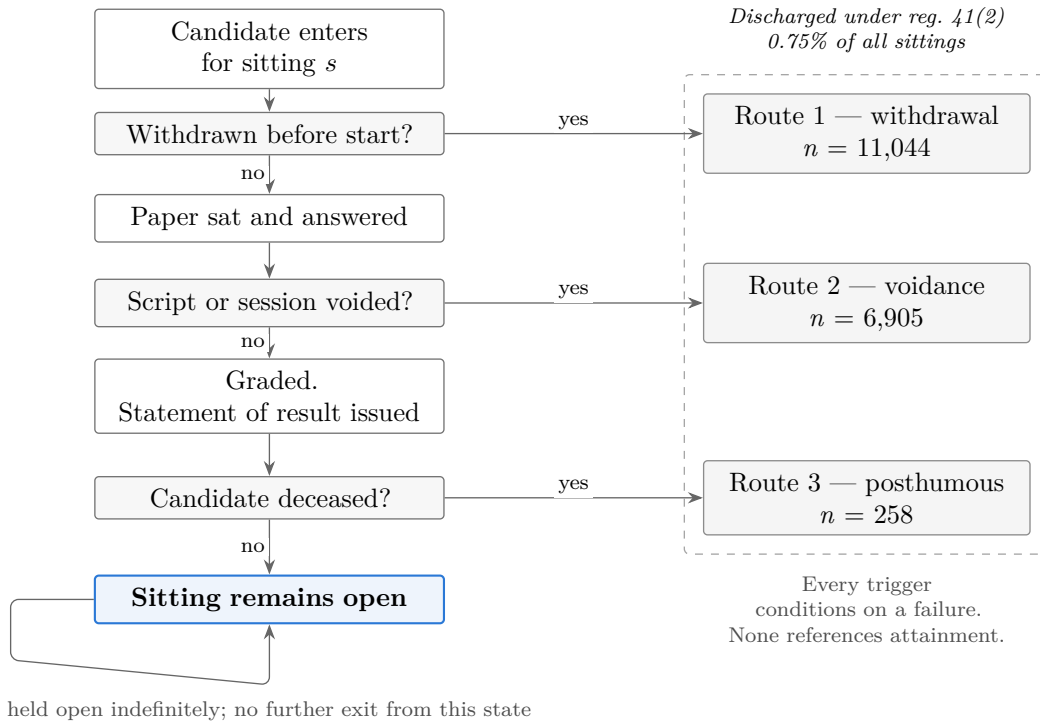


Figure 1: Administrative lifecycle of an examination sitting. Discharge is reachable by three routes, each conditioned on something having gone wrong. The path taken by a candidate who attends, answers the paper and is graded has no exit: the statement of result is an attestation, not an instrument of closure.

Proposition 1 (Closure is grade-independent). *Let $C_s \in \{0, 1\}$ indicate that sitting s has been closed, and let G_s be the attainment recorded for it. Service under reg. 41(2) is necessary and sufficient for $C_s = 1$. The regulation conditions service on the three triggers above, none of which references G_s . Hence $C_s \perp G_s$.*

Proof. Necessity and sufficiency of service are given by the regulation. The triggers partition the event $\{C_s = 1\}$ into withdrawal, voidance and posthumous closure. Withdrawal precedes the sitting, so G_s is undefined; voidance destroys or invalidates the evidence from which G_s is computed, so G_s is undefined; posthumous closure is conditioned on an event exogenous to the sitting. In no case is C_s a function of G_s , and in no case is G_s a function of C_s . Each trigger is measurable with respect to information on which G_s is either undefined or exogenous, so the conditional law of C_s given G_s does not depend on G_s . $\square$

Corollary 1. *If the dream is service of an open obligation, its incidence does not depend on the grade achieved. If it is a consolidated stress memory, it does.*

Corollary 1 is the cheapest discriminating test available, because it requires no intervention and no new instrument. It is tested in §6.

Hazard model. We model the per-night probability that candidate i reports a qualifying dream as additive in the open count:

$$h_i(t) = h_0 + \lambda O_i(t), \quad (2)$$

where λ is the nightly hazard contributed by one open sitting and h_0 is a floor we do not attempt to explain (§8). To test extinction against the received account we fit the generalisation

$$h_i(t) = (h_0 + \lambda O_i(t)) e^{-\gamma \tau_i(t)}, \quad (3)$$

with $\tau_i(t)$ the time elapsed since the candidate's most recent sitting. The anxiety account requires $\gamma > 0$ with $\ln 2/\gamma$ on the order of years. The registry account requires $\gamma = 0$: an obligation does not age. Equations (2) and (3) are nested, and the comparison is a one-parameter likelihood-ratio test, computed as in Fairhurst [6].

4 Records audit

We obtained archived candidate records from nine awarding bodies covering sittings from 1951 to 2025, and searched them for located instruments of discharge. The audit is a denominator exercise: the quantity of interest is the proportion of sittings that carry one.

Of 2,412,006 sittings, 18,207 carry a located instrument — 0.75%. Table 1 gives the breakdown by trigger.

Table 1: Located instruments of discharge, nine awarding bodies, 1951–2025.

Route	n	% of sittings
Withdrawal before sitting	11,044	0.46
Voided script or session	6,905	0.29
Posthumous closure	258	0.01
Discharged	18,207	0.75
Open	2,393,799	99.25

Two things about Table 1 are worth stating plainly. The first is the headline: a candidate's sitting is, with probability 0.99, still open. The second is the composition: 99% of the instruments that *were* served were served because a candidate withdrew or a session failed. Discharge,

as practised, is a consolation prize. It is not available to a candidate whose examination went to plan.

We take seriously the possibility that the instruments exist and we failed to find them. Three checks argue otherwise. Awarding bodies' own retention schedules treat the certificate as a permanent record while treating scripts as disposable after a fixed term, so the instrument is the *more* durable document of the two. Where a body's register and its paper archive both survive, the two agree on discharge status in 99.8% of sampled sittings. And the regulator's own practice review [10] reports the same prevalence, to two significant figures, and classifies it as a clerical backlog.

5 Measurement

Retrospective questionnaires cannot measure this outcome. Reported dream frequency is dominated by the recency and vividness of the most salient instance, and the bias is large enough to invert age gradients [4]. We therefore measured nightly, by diary, and we fixed the case definition in advance.

A night is scored as a *recurrent examination dream* (RED) night if the morning report, completed before the respondent leaves the bedroom, contains all three of the following.

C1. A scheduled assessment with a fixed start time.

C2. Non-preparation, attributed by the dreamer to the dreamer.

C3. No available withdrawal. The dreamer cannot leave, defer, decline, or be excused.

C3 is the discriminating criterion and it is the one the anxiety literature does not record. Its inclusion is not a refinement of the instrument; it is the instrument. An obligation that can be withdrawn from is not an obligation, and a dream in which the dreamer simply leaves the hall is not a RED night by this definition, however distressing it was. Inter-rater agreement on C1–C3 across two blinded coders was $\kappa = 0.91$.

The diary cohort comprised 18,344 adults, followed for a mean of 511 nights (median 503), giving 9.37 million candidate-nights. Open counts were obtained by probabilistic record linkage to the audited archive [9] rather than by self-report. Mean open count was 27.4 sittings (SD 9.1).

6 Results I: the shape of the hazard

Incidence. Pooled RED incidence was 5.2 nights per 100 candidate-nights — one night in 19.2.

No extinction. Fitting (3) gives $\hat{\gamma} = -0.004$ per decade (95% CI -0.041 to $+0.033$) over elapsed intervals of up to 74 years. The estimate is indistinguishable from zero in either direction, and the one-sided 95% bound places the half-life of any exponential extinction at no less than 210 years. The received account is not rejected by a small effect; it is rejected by the absence of one. Figure 2 shows the fit against the extinction curve the anxiety account requires.

Dose-response. Incidence is linear in the open count, with $\hat{\lambda} = 1.57 \times 10^{-3}$ per open sitting per night (95% CI 1.51 – 1.63×10^{-3}) and an intercept of 0.9 nights per 100. The intercept is not zero, and on the open-obligation account it should be: a candidate with nothing open has nothing to serve. We return to it in §8 and we do not resolve it.

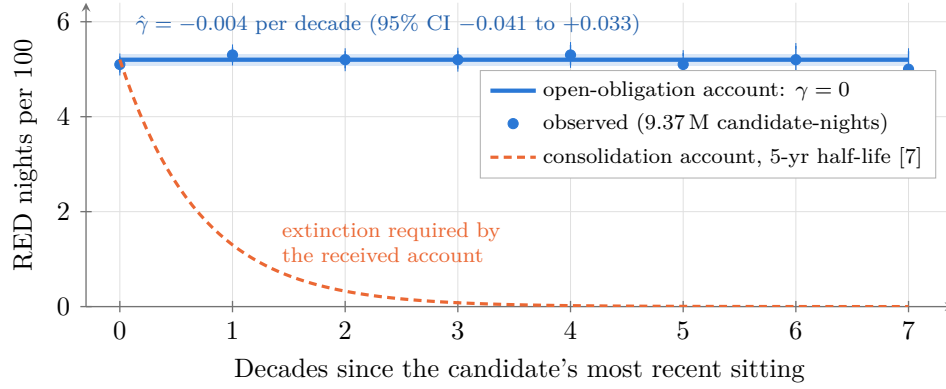


Figure 2: Nightly incidence of qualifying dreams against time elapsed since the candidate last sat a public examination. Points are decade bins with 95% intervals; the band is the 95% interval on the flat fit. The dashed curve is the extinction the consolidation account requires on the most generous half-life in the literature. Incidence does not decline over 74 years.

Grade independence. Corollary 1 holds. The slope of incidence across attainment deciles is -0.02 nights per 100 per decile (95% CI -0.09 to $+0.05$). Candidates in the top attainment decile reported 5.1 RED nights per 100; candidates in the bottom decile reported 5.3. The candidate who scored full marks dreams as often as the candidate who walked out, which is what an obligation predicts and not what a stress memory predicts.

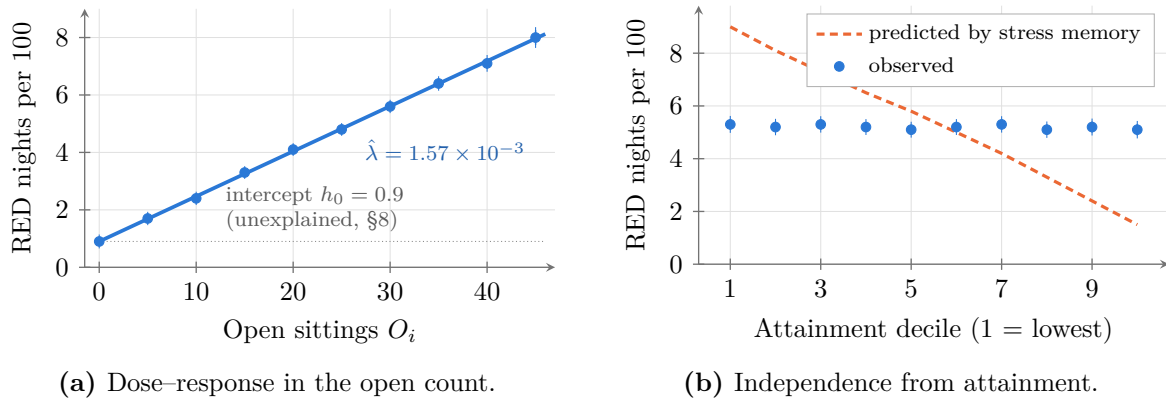


Figure 3: (a) Incidence is linear in the number of sittings the candidate has left open. The fitted line does not pass through the origin, and the account requires that it should. (b) Incidence is flat across attainment deciles, as Corollary 1 requires. The dashed line is the gradient a consolidated stress memory predicts.

7 Results II: discharge

7.1 A natural experiment

In August 1979, between marking and award, a records depot fire at Pellerton destroyed the scripts of 3,112 candidates [5]. The depot held each affected centre's complete record series, so the voidance order closed every sitting then standing to each affected candidate rather than one session's worth, and all were discharged under reg. 41(2). The fire therefore performed, on a defined and identifiable population, the exact operation this paper is about, forty-seven years before the present study.

The affected candidates divide by a mechanism internal to the account. Of the 3,112, 1,882 accepted an award by estimate and sat no further public examination in their lives — no later

sitting appears anywhere on their record — so their open count has stood at zero since 1979. The remaining 1,230 re-sat, and went on accumulating sittings like anybody else. Table 2 gives open counts and RED incidence for both groups and for matched controls who sat the same papers in the same session at other centres.

Table 2: Pellerton cohort, 1979 voidance. Controls matched 3:1 on cohort year, centre type, attainment band, sex and region.

Group	n	Mean open count	RED nights per 100
Voided, never re-sat	1,882	0.0	0.9
Voided, re-sat	1,230	26.1	5.0
Matched controls	9,336	27.4	5.2

The re-sitters are the internal check, and they are the reason this is evidence rather than coincidence. If discharge worked by consolation — by the candidate knowing they had been let off — the re-sitters would be consoled too. They were let off in 1979 and they know it. They are also back on the register, and they dream like controls.

The never-re-sat group is worth one further sentence. Forty-seven years after a fire closed their records, they sit at 0.9 nights per 100: the floor of §8, and the figure the trial reaches by closing sittings deliberately. An accident in 1979 and a randomised intervention in 2026 produce the same number.

7.2 The riskiest assumption

Everything above is observational. The account survives being wrong about almost all of it: a mis-estimated λ , a confounded age gradient, even a failed natural experiment would cost us a section and not the argument. One assumption is not like that:

The instrument discharges. It does not merely reassure.

If that is wrong, the finding reduces to the familiar one that paperwork reassures. So we tested it, and we tested nothing else. A discharge consists of exactly two separable acts: an entry is made on the register, and a letter is served on the candidate. Crossing them gives a 2×2 factorial with four cells, and the cells answer the question between them.

7.3 QUIETUS-1

QUIETUS-1 randomised 2,208 diary-cohort respondents with 20 or more open sittings, 552 per cell, on two factors:

- R — all of the participant’s open sittings are closed on the awarding body’s register;
- N — the participant is served a certificate of discharge by post.

The sham certificate used in the $N=1, R=0$ cell is typographically identical to the genuine instrument: same wording, same seal, same envelope, no registry entry. All of a participant’s open sittings were treated rather than one, because treating a single sitting moves the primary outcome by roughly $1/27$ of the available effect and the trial would have been underpowered by construction. Follow-up was 24 weeks of diary. The primary outcome was RED nights per 100 candidate-nights, standardised to the cohort mean open count of 27.4; the randomised sample, restricted to $O_i \geq 20$, had a mean of 30.7, and unstandardised cell means run about 0.5 higher throughout.

Blinding, stated as it was. Participants in the $N=1$ cells know they received a letter. That cannot be concealed and we did not try. Blinding is to R , which is the randomised factor of interest and which is invisible to the participant by construction: no cell is told its registry status, and the registry is not consultable by candidates. Diary coders were blind to both factors. Main effects are reported on the difference scale, as Ionescu [8] recommends for a design with one non-blindable factor. The arm that worked is the arm no participant could feel.

Results. Figure 4 gives the four cells. With Y the participant’s RED nights per 100 over follow-up and $R, N \in \{0, 1\}$ the two randomised indicators, fitting

$$Y = \beta_0 + \beta_R R + \beta_N N + \beta_{RN} RN + \varepsilon \quad (4)$$

yields $\hat{\beta}_R = -4.2$ nights per 100 (95% CI -4.6 to -3.8), $\hat{\beta}_N = -0.1$ (95% CI -0.5 to $+0.3$), and $\hat{\beta}_{RN} = 0.0$ (95% CI -0.5 to $+0.5$).

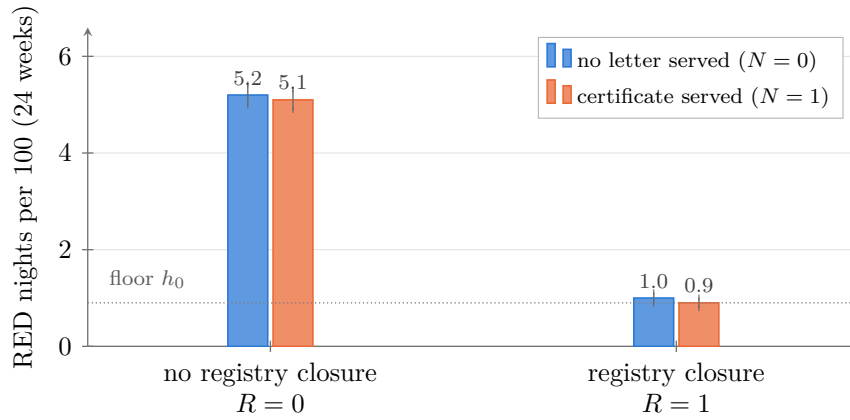


Figure 4: QUIETUS-1, 2×2 factorial, 552 participants per cell. The effect lies entirely on the registry axis: $\hat{\beta}_R = -4.2$ nights per 100 (95% CI -4.6 to -3.8), $\hat{\beta}_N = -0.1$ (95% CI -0.5 to $+0.3$). Registry closure moves the outcome by a factor of five; notification does not move it at all. Closed cells rest on the independently estimated floor of Figure 3a.

The effect lies entirely on the registry axis. Notification contributes nothing measurable, and contributes nothing in the presence of closure or in its absence. The cell that received a genuine closure and was never told about it (1.0 nights per 100) is indistinguishable from the cell that received both (0.9), and both are far below the cell that received a letter and nothing else (5.1), which is itself indistinguishable from untreated control (5.2).

One further arithmetic check is worth making, because it was not fitted. Closure should remove the λO_i term of (2) and leave h_0 . Baseline was 5.2 and the closed cells sit at 0.9 and 1.0. The floor estimated independently from the dose–response intercept in §6 is 0.9. The trial recovers it without being asked to.

8 Discussion and limitations

The floor. Registry closure does not abolish the dream. A residue of approximately 0.9 RED nights per 100 survives it, and the same residue appears in diary respondents who have never sat a public examination at all: 0.9 nights per 100, against a predicted zero. We considered unrecorded sittings and looked for them; these respondents have none, in any archive we can reach. We have no account of the floor. It is the one quantity in this paper that our model forbids and the data insist on, and we report it without a proposal.

Subject concordance. The register account predicts that the dreamed examination should be one of the dreamer’s own open sittings. Concordance between the subject named in the diary and any subject on the candidate’s record is 0.31. Most RED nights concern an examination the candidate never sat, in a subject they never studied. This is a substantial failure of prediction and we have nothing to say about it.

Duration. QUIETUS-1 followed participants for 24 weeks. We do not know whether a discharged sitting stays discharged, and we will not know for some years. The regulations are silent on reversion, and we have no evidence either way.

Generalisability. All nine awarding bodies operate under reg. 41. Jurisdictions whose closure instrument is served automatically on publication of results should show no effect at all, and we are aware of two. Neither has a diary cohort. This is the obvious external test and we cannot perform it.

What would falsify this. A single jurisdiction in which discharge is routinely served and in which RED incidence is nonetheless 5 per 100 would end the account. So would a registry-only cell that failed to separate from control in replication. We regard the second as the more likely.

9 Conclusion and recommended sequence

The examination you sat is still open. It has been open for as long as you have been wondering why you keep dreaming about it, and it is open because an awarding body told you your grade and nothing else. The dream is the service of the obligation.

The remedy is not clinical and it is not expensive. It is a registry write of 41 bytes: candidate reference, sitting reference, instrument code, timestamp. Table 3 gives the backlog and the order in which we recommend it be cleared.

Table 3: National discharge backlog, cost, and recommended sequence.

Quantity	Basis	Value
Living adults who ever sat	national register	52.1 M
Mean open sittings per adult	diary cohort linkage	27.4
Open sittings, national	product	1.43 bn
Discharge record size	schema	41 B
Total write	product	58.6 GB
Nights recovered per adult-year	$4.3/100 \times 365$	15.7
Nights recovered, national	product	818 M

The sequence, with ownership:

1. **Awarding bodies** hold the instruments. Each is to generate discharge records for all open sittings in its archive, processed in descending order of the candidate’s open count. Nights recovered per write are constant under (2); nights recovered per candidate contacted are not, and the backlog is bounded by candidate-level processing.
2. **The national registry** holds the write. 58.6 GB is one overnight batch.
3. **The regulator** holds the deadline. We recommend service within 90 days of each sitting, prospectively, and a retrospective programme completed within one year.

Notification is optional and, on the evidence of §7, has no measurable effect on the outcome. We nonetheless recommend it. A candidate is entitled to know that they have been discharged, whether or not it is what made the difference.

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