Developing proficiency in clinical examination techniques is integral for any medical student — not only for passing objective structured clinical examinations (OSCEs), but also for the purpose of becoming a capable physician. This can be one of the more overwhelming aspects of the student journey and there are a myriad of resources to choose from to ease this process. The modern student may be drawn to the plethora of digital resources available online. With their variety in format and ease of access, these can be useful for simplifying difficult ideas. However, it can be difficult to distil specific information from the vast archives available online, and often the full wealth of information is hidden behind paywalls. In contrast, textbooks are a one-off investment that usually have a defined structure and purpose, enabling their use as reliable references.

The Stepwise Clinical Examination Handbook (2nd edition) can aid the reader in developing skill in clinical examination techniques. This concise handbook is useful for all levels of medicine — from the medical student learning the basics of correct examination technique, all the way to the qualified physician looking for a convenient and quick-to-read refresher on the various clinical examinations.

This book is succinct and easy to read. As a result of its brevity, the handbook is lightweight and portable, making it a convenient resource for the busy physician. With its compact form, it can easily be transported around with the reader to look up techniques as the need arises. However, those in search for a comprehensive textbook will be disappointed as only so much information can fit within the book’s 108 pages. Often details such as the pathophysiology behind the various signs and symptoms mentioned is not included, and thus the best use of this book would be in conjunction with other sources of information. Additionally, of note to visual learners, the book does not contain any photos or diagrams.

The book is divided into three sections, providing a clear, easy-to-navigate structure. The layout of the book offers the reader a systematic approach to the organisation of information, aiding long-term retention.

Part I comprises a series of step-by-step guides for the physical examination of the various body systems, along with subspecialty examinations. Each examination manoeuvre is described briefly with the use of simple sentences. Diamond symbols accompany some of the more difficult examination techniques, indicating that detailed descriptions can be found in the glossary. A blank checklist is included with each physical examination guide for use by peers during the feedback process, permitting the reader to keep track of their performance and identify aspects of their own examination technique that may require fine-tuning.

Part II presents differentials for various clinical signs in an easy-to-read format. For certain conditions, mnemonics are included, which can be useful for long-term retention. This section is clear and concise with the use of tables and lists. Throughout the first two parts of the book, the colour of the page is associated with the body system its contents cover. This expedites the process of information retrieval.

Part III is a glossary of specific examination techniques which expands upon some of the more difficult components of physical examination from the first section. It guides the user through the purpose of the examination, the ideal positioning of the patient, the standard technique, and the interpretation of examination findings. This section condenses a large amount of information into a concise 30-page chapter. An index can be found on the very last page, which contains a list of examination techniques and their corresponding page numbers in alphabetical order, allowing the reader to reach information quickly.

Overall, the Stepwise Clinical Examination Handbook (2nd edition) is a worthwhile addition to your collection. There are many different resources for clinical skills, but long-winded textbooks are not always the best option when you need to look something up on-the-fly. It is useful for anyone searching for a supplement to lengthy textbooks. Overall, this book is intended to be a “guide-on-the-side”, and, as stated in the book itself, it is not a definitive guide on the physical examination of an adult patient. Therefore, readers will at times need to draw information from other sources. Overall, the book is excellent, and succeeds in presenting a vast array of information in a concise and attractive format.

References

About the author
Karen Suresh is a third-year medical student at the University of Otago.

Conflict of interest
Karen Suresh was provided with a copy of the Stepwise Clinical Examination Handbook (2nd edition) in exchange for the completion of this book review.