Policy on disputed exam questions

Although medicine and science strive for precision, they are (by nature) in constant flux. Even concepts that are considered “fundamental knowledge” are evolving, and can be associated with conflict in the literature. When faculty members prepare lectures and syllabi, they aim to provide a thoughtful synthesis of current knowledge, without obscuring key points in an annoying muddle of small controversies. This “best” synthesis is then intended to serve as the database that students should use to identify the “best” answer to each exam question.

Inevitably, however, powerful search engines (such as PubMed and Google) provide students with opportunities to challenge course content. If done in a professional manner, this is a good thing—students and faculty alike benefit from exposure to new information about important topics. In recent years, the Forum has provided a venue in which students and faculty can address such issues. The back-and-forth dialog helps to clarify the answers to potential exam questions prior to the administration of the exam, and (more importantly) allows all students to benefit from an open discussion of concepts that are relevant to their future clinical practice.

It is not, however, acceptable for a student to perform a wide-scale database search after an exam has been administered, for the express purpose of disputing an exam question. This sort of post-hoc argumentation has minimal educational value, and frames our joint educational mission in unacceptably adversarial terms. Thus, as a matter of policy, exam questions will reflect information from outside sources only if that information is introduced prior to the exam via the forum, and only if it has been validated by the appropriate faculty member. If a student investigates an exam question after the fact, and discovers information that is at variance with the course material, the collegial thing to do is to pass that information on to the instructor for the benefit of subsequent students; such information will not, however, affect the grading of any previously-administered exam.