

Health Care Reform, Board Certification, and Optometry's Next Step to Protect Our Future:

Part One in a Series of Policy Briefings for AOA Members

“With health care reform moving on the fast track it is absolutely imperative for doctors of optometry to have a board certification process in place. There is interest in board certification not only from federal regulatory agencies, but also from consumers who want to be able to assess the quality of providers. The American Optometric Association and other national optometry organizations are on the right path to pursue the creation of a board certification process.”

Mohammad Akhter, M.D., M.P.A.
Executive Director, National Medical Association

Critical to optometry's internal debate about how best to protect our patients' and our doctors' best interests is the need for full understanding of the powerful trends in the health care environment. These trends strongly support the need for implementation of a national board certification process along with a program for maintaining certification throughout clinical practice.

To keep our members well informed on the changing conditions of health care and the evolving model of board certification under consideration, the AOA will be issuing a series of Health Care Reform and Board Certification Briefings via direct e-mail to members and the *AOA News*.

This first briefing is on recent activity by Medicine to more tightly align board certification with national health care reform. These timely developments put further pressure on optometry to take action to protect its future.

Just this past week, the American Board of Medical Specialties (ABMS) released a statement about the role of physician standards in achieving improved health care performance and effectiveness. They called for new legislation and regulation to more directly tie board certification and Maintenance of Certification (MOC) to participation in health care and access to pay for performance. Specifically, the panelists at this event urged that board certification and Maintenance of Certification be “included in health care reform legislation as a way for patients, health insurers and policymakers to know that providers are delivering effective, quality care.”

Other statements in the ABMS press release include:

- “If we are going to have meaningful health care reform, we need to have everyone on board. Now is the time to ensure that board certification is aligned with efforts to

improve quality, cost and care.” -- *Janet M. Corrigan, Ph.D., MBA, president and chief executive officer of the National Quality Forum (NQF).*

- The American Board of Medical Specialties model for Maintenance of Certification “aligns perfectly with what we are doing at CMS.” -- *Barry Straube, M.D., director and chief medical officer of the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS).*
- Dr. Straube suggested that one idea for including MOC in health care reform would be to count it as a Physician Quality Reporting Initiative (PQRI) measure. (*ABMS National Policy Forum Underscores Value of Aligning ABMS MOC with National Healthcare Policy Reform Movement, Press Release, April 8, 2009*)

Preparing for Change: Are We Ready to Protect our Scope of Practice and Physician Status?

America’s health care system is in the nation’s spotlight. Health care reform is at the top of the agenda in Washington and many states. Public awareness of, and interest in, the quality of care is growing dramatically as consumers demand greater transparency and accountability from the providers on whom they rely.

What’s at stake is nothing less than the stature of our profession with patients, policymakers and, most important, the public and private payers who are revising how they will compensate health care providers.

Employers and other payers of health care services are moving to adopt policies to reward value and effectiveness in health care delivery. Professional societies are moving to adopt stronger standards to demonstrate initial and continuing competence in the various health disciplines. These professions are preparing for the increased scrutiny of all aspects of health care, including the status and role of health professionals in transparency and accountability of quality.

Optometry must be ready to sustain the scrutiny of health care reform and protect its future role.

Over the last three decades, the AOA and state affiliates have made impressive gains in a long-term effort to take its rightful place among the ranks of physicians. Doctors of optometry are considered “physicians” under the Medicare program. And, we are recognized as vision care professionals with a rigorous educational preparation and a scope of practice that allows us to diagnose and treat a variety of conditions and to identify markers for a wide range of systemic diseases. Optometrists’ federal status as physicians brings with it the expectations of policymakers that our profession will follow the steps of other physician groups to adopt strong standards to demonstrate initial and continuing competence.

The AOA, working with other optometric organizations, believes now is the time to take the next steps to engage the profession in efforts to deepen and enrich preparation for practice and to demonstrate the continuing competence of optometrists throughout their careers in clinical practice.

The AOA is a participant in a multi-year effort (the Joint Board Certification Project Team – JBCPT) to develop a program of board certification in optometry accompanied by periodic confirmation of competence through a MOC program. The initial model was first released to the

profession in January. Based on input through the AOA national structure, many changes in the initial model have been adopted by the JBCPT. As the ABMS press release demonstrates, external events are also shaping our approach. We plan to continue seeking new information and more analysis over the next several weeks as state leaders prepare for a formal debate on the issue at the AOA House of Delegates in June.

Why Board Certification and Maintenance of Certification Now?

There are a number of compelling reasons that have led us to recommend board certification and MOC for optometry at this time. It is our obligation to prepare for the future and ensure that the practice of optometry is positioned to survive and flourish as health care continues to evolve.

- Board certification is nothing new to doctors of medicine. The American Board of Medical Specialties is now in its 75th year.ⁱ It assists its 24 member boards, including the American Board of Ophthalmology, in their efforts to develop and implement educational and professional standards for the evaluation and certification of physician specialists. These 24 member boards cover more than 145 medical specialties and subspecialties.
- Podiatrists, dentists, oral surgeons and chiropractors have their own certifying bodies outside of the ABMS. In the case of podiatry, there are three board certification programs under the auspices of the American Board of Podiatric Surgery, the American Board of Podiatric Orthopedics and Primary Podiatric Medicine, and the American Board of Multiple Specialties in Podiatry. Each of these boards requires certain training and experience beyond the doctoral level and requires recertification every four or 10 years.ⁱⁱ Doctors of chiropractic also have board certification options sponsored by the American Chiropractic Neurology Board, the American Chiropractic Board of Sports Physicians, and the American Chiropractic Board of Infrared Imaging. Again, each of these boards offers a certification program requiring additional formal credit hours beyond the doctoral level, experience requirements, and successful completion of written and practical examinations. One of these boards requires recertification on an annual basis while the other two do not offer a recertification process, but generally do require accredited continuing education hours to maintain certification.ⁱⁱⁱ
- Despite longstanding board certification programs for many physician specialties, these programs have not been static but have continued to evolve, in part due to external pressures. For example, certificates originally were not time-limited. Later, many boards required periodic recertification (every six to 10 years). In 2000, the 24 member boards of the ABMS agreed to evolve their recertification model to one of continuous professional development – the ABMS MOC program. The MOC program is based on six core competencies (patient care, medical knowledge, interpersonal and communication skills, professionalism, systems-based practice, and practice-based learning and improvement). In 2006, all member boards received approval of their MOC program plans, which they are now in the process of implementing. As ABMS states, MOC “uses evidence-based guidelines and national standards and best practices in combination with customized continuing education so physicians demonstrate their leadership in the national movement for health care quality.”^{iv}

- Maintenance of Certification is supported by the American Medical Association, the American Hospital Association, the Federation of State Medical Boards, and the Joint Commission, among others.
- On March 26, 2009, the ABMS announced adoption of a new set of standards designed to further enhance its MOC program. This set of standards outlines and sets timelines for adopting several new MOC program elements, including:
 - Documentation that physicians are meeting continued medical education and self-assessment requirements;
 - Evidence of participation in practice-based assessment and quality improvement every two to five years;
 - Completion of a patient safety self-assessment program at least once during each MOC cycle; and
 - Assessment of communication skills using a patient survey and an approved peer survey.

These changes follow the launch of the ABMS 2008-2011 Enhanced Public Trust Initiative, which “brings an increased commitment to quality health care and transparency in physician accountability and provides the opportunity to enhance the value of MOC to the public, physicians, and the Board Enterprise (ABMS and its 24 member boards).”^v

Lessons for Optometry

To ensure that optometry continues to enjoy the status and recognition accorded to health professionals prepared at the doctoral level and to meet the expectations of payers and our patients, optometry needs a national board certification process accessible to all optometrists. A process that only serves doctors with a specialty interest or the few percent of optometrists who have completed residencies would fail to create a national program that could address health care reform. A true national system would also set the groundwork for a solution to the additional problem of state license portability.

Please watch for the next briefing on value-driven health care reform, quality measure-based pay for performance, and the evolving model for optometry’s response to these trends and developments.

ⁱ For additional information, visit the American Board of Medical Specialties Web site at www.abms.org.

ⁱⁱ For further details on podiatry board certification programs, visit the following Web sites: <http://www.abps.org/content/members/Pathway.aspx>; <http://www.abpoppm.org/>; or <http://www.abmsp.org/>.

ⁱⁱⁱ For further details on chiropractic board certification programs, visit the following Web sites: <http://www.acnb.org/>; <http://www.acbsp.com/certifications.htm>; and http://www.accii.org/pdf%20files/Certifying_Requirements.pdf

^{iv} American Board of Medical Specialties, “What Board Certification Means,” Available at http://www.abms.org/About_Board_Certification/means.aspx.

^v American Board of Medical Specialties, “New Standards Adopted to Elevate Physician Life-Long Learning Assessment for the ABMS Maintenance of Certification (MOC) Program,” Press Release, March 26, 2009.