



Will Board Certification Be Required of General Practitioners?

Despite claims made the last three years, it remains unlikely insurance panels, health agencies or regulatory bodies will require general practice optometrists to possess credentials other than professional degree and a valid, current license to practice.

The legal authority to provide optometry care to the public is granted by state statutes and by state boards of optometry issuing licenses. There is no movement by state legislatures or their boards of optometry to require additional credentials for the practice of optometry other than efforts made periodically to expand the privileges of general practice.

The Association of Regulatory Boards of Optometry and the National Board of Examiners in Optometry do not endorse ABO board certification of general practitioners and point out passage of NBEO examinations or licensing examinations do not constitute board certification as defined by medicine, dentistry and podiatry. Several state boards have cautioning licensees about claiming advanced competence via certifications that do not require post-graduate training and passage of specialty examinations.

Board certification in other prescribing health professions is restricted to practitioners who become specialists by completing post-degree residency training and passage of tests of advanced, specialized competence. These board certifications confer specialist status and are utilized by federal, state and locally chartered JCAHO accredited medical facilities, Medicare and Medicaid and health insurance panels to establish clinical privileges of specialists and billing reimbursements to specialists.

These same organizations recognize non-MD, licensed, prescribing providers (i.e. dentistry, optometry, psychology) for privileging and billing by requiring only professional degree and license as do “any licensed provider” state statutes.

None of these organizations have shown an interest in requiring general practice non-MDs to have other than degree and valid license for credentialing and billing.

Concern exists among some general practice optometrists they may, in the future, be required to be “board certified”. This apprehension was triggered four years ago when the Joint Project Team on Board Certification (JPTBC) predicted the above groups would soon required board certification of optometrists and the American Board of Optometry (ABO) was created to offer “board certification in optometry” with a “maintenance of certification” program required every 10 years for re-certification.

While the JPTBC, the AOA and the schools vigorously pushed to form ABO, none of the other non-MD prescribing professions have taken steps to offer board certification to its general practitioners. As a result, this has become a divisive issue within our profession, created strong differences of opinion, and what polls that have been taken show a majority of optometrists opposed to board certification of

general practitioners. In fact a new national organization, the American Optometric Society, has been created to attempt to dissuade the ABO from proceeding.

The action to form ABO was based upon three questionable assumptions:

1. There remains no evidence any external body is considering requiring non-MD prescribing practitioners hold credentials beyond professional degree and license (footnote). JCAHO accredited federal, state and local medical facilities, Medicare, Medicaid, and insurance panels continue to specify degree and license as sole requirements to practice optometry and submit billings.
2. ABO certification does not meet criterion utilized by medical, dental, osteopathic and podiatric board certification bodies. The AOA urged the National Association of VA Optometrists to endorse ABO but it did not because ABO criterion will not be seen as creditable by VA credentialing committees.
3. ABO tests at the level of competence attested to by professional degree and state license rather than at an advanced, specialized level so it is misleading for ABO to term its system board certification.

To Whom Will ABCMO Board Certification Offer Value?

ABCMO board certification recognizes specialist status and assists optometrists seeking appointment at accredited health facilities when they present their credentials to privileging and credentialing committees that recognize the purpose and requirements of specialty board certification.

Few general practice dentists (<1%) have credentials beyond professional degree-license. It has long been the position of dentistry and optometry their professional training fully prepare graduates for general practice and state dentistry and optometry boards act to ensure practitioners retain competence through mandatory requirements for license renewals. The creation of ABO was a sharp reversal of this longstanding tenet of our profession.

Like board certifications in medicine, dentistry and podiatry, ABCMO certification signifies advanced competence in a specialty of optometry and is not applicable or suitable for those in general practice.

ABCMO Does Not Oppose Legitimate Board Certification of

General Practitioners

In the future, general practice optometry may require additional training but no study has shown current training inadequately prepare graduates for general practice and no evidence shows state boards do not adequately ensure optometry licensees retain competence in general practice. ABCMO therefore believes there is no need for additional credentialing of general practitioners at this time.

ABCMO is only concerned because ABO misrepresents itself as offering “board certification in optometry” although its criterion do not meet accepted standards for board certification....the completion of an accredited post-graduate residency in a specialty and passage of a written examination testing advanced competence in a specialty.

Instead, ABO offers only confirmation of competence in general practice at the same level attested by professional degree, licensure and re-licensure. Since only state optometry boards have legal standing to affirm and reaffirm competence in general practice via licensing and re-licensing, ABO lacks legal jurisdiction to assume, duplicate or supersede duties exercised by state optometry boards.

It is, in my opinion, misrepresentation for ABO to term its program “board certification in optometry” as it does not certify competence at a level beyond that represented by degree and license, the hallmarks of board certification, and has no legal standing to perform functions ascribed to state optometry boards by statutory law..

More recently, after predictions of board certification of optometrists soon being required failed to materialize, the ABO began to imply its certification will raise the public’s perception of general practice optometry, but there is no evidence of this in the literature regarding health marketing. Eye, and especially vision care, is viewed as a commodity for which purchasing decisions revolve chiefly around price, convenience and selection and not credentials of the provider.

The sole “consumer group” interested in board certification are the credentialing committees of the agencies listed in paragraph four that understand board certification to denote advanced competence in a specialty achieved by residency training and passage of examination testing advanced competence in a specialty.

Footnote:

The following is taken from an American Optometric Society e-mail of May 11, 2011.

“The American Optometric Society spoke directly with Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS), Congressman Scott Rigell’s office and VSP. We learned... there is no creditable evidence that anyone will require optometrists to be board certified.”

1. “CMS has never and still does not require non-MD providers to be “board certified” for Medicare/Medicaid billing. The federal government relies on state boards of optometry to set maintenance of certification and scope of care policies. It is unlikely these polices will change.”
J.D. Smith, CMS Branch Operations Manager
2. “There is no requirement for optometrists to have board certification for the Physician Quality Reporting System (PQRS) 0.5% Medicare bonus or for any other reason.”

CMS Congressional Liaison Office of Representative Scott Rigell.

(It was claimed by prominent supporters of ABO that PQRS was definitive proof optometrists needed to become board certified. In fact, this aspect of PQRS applies only to those holding the MD and board certified in one of 24 ABMS recognized medical specialties. It does not apply to any other types of prescribing providers. Ed.)

This editorial is based upon what the author believes to be factual information regarding the credentialing of independent prescribing practitioners, the commoditization of health care, history and role of US medical credentialing systems and the manner by which specialists are recognized via board certification in medicine, dentistry and podiatry.

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