

Diplomate Verification Update 2007

Since 1970, when the charter class of physicians attained certification by the American Board of Family Practice, the Board has acknowledged the accomplishment of all physicians who achieve certification and recertification as a specialist in Family Medicine, the nation's 20th primary medical specialty. For the first 26 years, the Board published an annual Directory of Diplomates as a way of honoring and recognizing certified family physicians. The printed directory was made available to all Diplomates, residency training programs, libraries, and other individuals or entities. Formal recognition beyond certification in Family Medicine was added in the 1990s for physicians who achieve certification in Geriatric Medicine and Sports Medicine and received a Certificate of Added Qualifications (CAQ) in those specialties. When requested, letters are sent to any person, organization, or entity requiring the Board's assurance that a physician is certified by the American Board of Family Medicine.

The ABFM now operates, distributes information, and facilitates interaction with candidates and Diplomates via its Web site at www.theabfm.org. The Web site contains a "directory" devoted to the continued recognition of family physicians who have attained certification, recertification, and a CAQ at any time in their professional career. Obviously, many Diplomates have retired from the practice of medicine, yet the Board continues to recognize the efforts of its past Diplomates in the same way it acknowledges current Diplomates. The online directory has become a refined extension of its predecessor, the Directory of Diplomates. The process of locating certified family physicians online is simple; the user enters a city and state into the online directory and a listing of current board-certified physicians in that geographical area is generated. Alternately, the user enters the first and last name of a physician and all family physicians with identical names are shown with city and state of residence and current and past certification status.

In addition, the online verification process facilitates the ease by which hospitals, third-party pay-

ers, and credentializing agencies can verify the certification status of family physicians. By accessing the Verification page of our Web site and entering the first name, last name, date of birth, and last 4 digits of the physician's social security number, the user can search the ABFM's database to verify a physician's certification status. The data in the verification system is under the direct and complete control of the ABFM staff and is protected from and cannot be altered by unauthorized individuals.

Written verification of a Diplomate's status continues to be an option for Diplomates and third parties. Diplomates can obtain a verification letter at no charge by entering the Physician Portfolio with their ABFM identification and password and clicking on the "Request Verification Letter" button. Others seeking written verification of a Diplomate's status can have a letter generated by ABFM staff for a \$25 fee; or they can access the ABFM's online verification system at no charge. The ABFM grants permission to copy the information provided by the online verification system for the purpose of maintaining physician credentials or for activities related to the evaluation of physician qualifications. The same database is used for written and online inquiries.

Just as recertification has evolved into Maintenance of Certification for Family Physicians (MC-FP), the online verification process is evolving in its role as the primary source for finding a family physician's certification status. A new online verification system will be launched later this year in 2 phases. The first phase, expected to be available in July 2007, will display certification information in a grid format. The second phase, expected to be available by the end of 2007, will expand verification to include a physician's standing within MC-FP, a program designed to enhance the clinical excellence of family physicians through continuous measurement of physician competencies. The 4 components of MC-FP—Professionalism, Self-Assessment and Lifelong Learning, Cognitive Expertise, and Performance in Practice—must be successfully completed for renewal of certification.

Table 1. Revised Online Verification System Categories

| Certification | Certification Status | Certification History | Current MC-FP Status | Comments |
|---------------------|----------------------|--|---------------------------|----------|
| Family Medicine | Certified | Certified 7/13/1990–12/31/1997 Recertified 7/11/1997–12/31/2004 Recertified 8/12/2003–12/31/2010 | Participating and current | |
| Sports Medicine CAQ | Certified | Certified 4/11/1997–12/31/2007 | | |

MC-FP, Maintenance of Certification for Family Physicians; CAQ, Certificate of Added Qualifications.

The revised online verification system will display information in 5 categories (see Table 1).

Certification

Indicates that the Diplomate has successfully met all requirements for initial certification or recertification in the specialty of Family Medicine or in one or more areas of added qualifications.

- Family Medicine
- Sports Medicine CAQ
- Geriatric Medicine CAQ
- Adolescent Medicine CAQ
- Sleep Medicine CAQ (available in 2007)
- Hospice and Palliative Medicine CAQ (available in 2008)

Certification Status

Indicates the current status of the Diplomate's certification in the specialty of Family Medicine or in one or more areas of added qualifications.

- *Certified.* The Diplomate has successfully met all requirements for initial certification or recertification.
- *Not Certified.* The Diplomate's time-limited certificate has expired, or the CAQ certificate is current but not in effect because the Family Medicine certificate has expired or been withdrawn (there will be an explanation in the Comments column).
- *Expired.* The Diplomate's time-limited Family Medicine or CAQ certificate has expired.
- *Withdrawn.* The Diplomate's certification has been withdrawn because of disciplinary action by the ABFM (there will be an explanation in the Comments column).

Certification History

Indicates a chronological history of all the Diplomate's certifications (any discontinuity will be explained in the Comments column).

Current MC-FP Status

Indicates the Diplomate's status in the MC-FP process.

- *Participating and Current.* The Diplomate is participating in MC-FP and has met all requirements to date.
- *Participating and Not Current.* The Diplomate is participating in MC-FP but has not completed all current requirements.
- *Not Participating.* The Diplomate has not fulfilled the requirements necessary to participate in MC-FP.
- *Not Scheduled to Participate.* The Diplomate has not yet entered MC-FP.

Comments

Indicates explanations for any certification status other than "certified," any noncertified interval, etc.

Family physicians who entered MC-FP within the year following their last successful examination, beginning with the 2003 examination, and who successfully complete all requirements through Stage 1 (the first 3 years of MC-FP) and Stage 2 (the second 3 years of MC-FP) will receive a 3-year extension to their 7-year Family Medicine certificate. Accordingly, the online verification system will appropriately note throughout each year of MC-FP the status of a physician in the MC-FP process. Physicians who are unable to complete the requirements of MC-FP as published will retain the certificate previously earned but they will remain on a traditional 7-year certification cycle.

The American Board of Medical Specialties (ABMS) Web site states that "certification means a commitment to quality care" and that consumers are becoming more active in learning about health, wellness, disease, and treatment options. The National Committee for Quality Assurance (NCQA) echoes these sentiments by indicating that the ed-

educated consumer is one of the most powerful forces driving improvement in health care. The NCQA also is on record as stating that “consumers who make informed choices and are engaged in their own care not only experience better health outcomes, they also help reward doctors, hospitals, and health plans that deliver better care and service.” The online Directory and Verification systems of the American Board of Family Medicine will enhance the visibility of family physician accomplish-

ments. Concurrently, the public will become aware and gain confidence in knowing that the first medical specialty board to require mandatory recertification has now implemented a program for its Diplomates to enhance their clinical excellence through continuous measurement of physician competencies.

Reprinted from *The Phoenix* Summer 2007 issue with permission from the American Board of Family Medicine 2007.