

BOARD NEWS

ABFM Outreach: A Strategic Approach to Creating Genuine Partnerships with Family Physicians

Ashley Webb, MA, Elizabeth Baxley, MD, John E. Brady, MD, and Warren P. Newton, MD, MPH

(J Am Board Fam Med 2023;36:698–702.)

A positive, genuine, and effective relationship between the American Board of Family Medicine (ABFM) and the physicians participating in continuous certification over the course of their professional careers is essential for ABFM to achieve its vision of “optimal health and health care for all people and communities that family physicians serve.” In 2016 to 2017, ABFM’s Board of Directors had focused conversations around the fact that our duty to the public would be strengthened by viewing our duty to current and future Diplomates as a partnership. From this perspective emerged the belief that by increasing the understanding of the purpose of certification, making the process easier to access and complete, and improving the value of activities involved in continuous certification, ABFM could simultaneously assure physicians and the public that the credential represents a meaningful measure of professionalism, cognitive expertise, and commitment to improvement. But this new relationship, including meeting Diplomates where they were and listening more effectively, would require both a policy and administrative shift.

The policy change occurred with the development of the ABFM Strategic Plan 2019 to 2025 as these conversations were memorialized as 1 of 6 major goals: To Support Diplomates and Their Practices Across Their Careers. Administratively, this meant engaging with family physicians more broadly and with a greater in-person presence and establishing a role of Ombudsperson for Diplomate Experience

within ABFM, which was filled by Dr. Elizabeth Baxley. To meet family physicians where they were, an intentional strategy was to seek closer partnerships with AAFP State Chapters, who serve as their professional “educational home.” Ms. Ashley Webb, who was selected to serve as the Director of Outreach in 2019, worked tirelessly to create important lines of communication with chapter leadership, seeking ways to be more present at chapter meetings and conferences, listening, and learning from their members, and offering one-on-one consultation to family physicians with questions about certification. This was particularly important given the number of improvements ABFM was making across the certification portfolio during this time, including the addition Family Medicine Certification Longitudinal Assessment, a new ABFM National Journal Club, and major revisions in both Knowledge Self Assessments and Performance Improvement activities.

A state chapter advisory group was formed in September 2018 which included staff from the AAFP and the executives from a broad group of chapters including Maryland, Illinois, North Carolina, Florida, Georgia, Texas, Ohio, Nebraska, Idaho and California. Meeting with this group was critical to better understand views regarding ABFM, to share what they hear from their members regarding board certification, and to consider ways that ABFM could build out an effective outreach and communication effort. Emerging from these conversations were several themes: 1) communication is improving – “the doors are open and let us keep them that way”; 2) local touch is important; 3) physicians still question the value of certification; and 4) there is still a lot of confusion about the process for achieving and maintaining certification. Chapters were enthusiastic to work with ABFM to educate and dispel common myths about certification, especially with regards to self-

From the American Board of Family Medicine, Lexington, KY, USA (AW, EB, WN), Department of Family Medicine, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC, USA (WN).

John E. Brady is with Riverside Regional Medical Center, Newport News, Virginia. He is a past Chair of the ABFM Board of Directors.

Conflict of interest: AW, EB, and WN are employees of the ABFM.

Corresponding author: Elizabeth Baxley, MD, American Board of Family Medicine, 1648 McGrathiana Parkway Suite 550, Lexington, KY 40511 (E-mail: ebaxley@theabfm.org).

assessment and performance improvement options, and they expressed an openness to identifying additional ways to make these shared efforts and goals sustainable. ABFM prioritized greater involvement with state chapters through presence at their meetings and submissions to the AAFP sponsored state chapter executives' newsletter. This also opened doors for ABFM to sponsor activities for chapter executives and staff at AAFP's FMX, Annual Chapter Leadership Forum, and its regional chapter leadership clusters with representation from chapter staff and elected leaders across the country.

Beginning with a focus on "What Is New? What Is True? And What Is Ahead?" in-person updates were provided to chapters by ABFM leadership along with provision of a booth for answering questions, providing individual consultation to physicians attending the meetings, and listening to their perspectives and feedback on certification and its processes. These were catalogued and brought back to ABFM leadership, staff, and the Board of Directors to enhance understanding and to inform strategic and operational decisions. In total, ABFM had visited 35 state chapters in 2019 and early 2020, providing us the opportunity to reach family physicians across broad geographies and practice types. We appreciated the immediate benefit to being in person, which allowed for enhanced bidirectional communication, greater opportunities for directly assisting family physicians, and to establish the stronger relationships we sought.

The COVID-19 pandemic necessitated a pivot to quickly standing up virtual updates and opportunities for dialog. These were accomplished through both live sessions and prerecorded videos presented at multiple chapter meetings throughout 2020, as well as FMX, and the National Conference for Students and Residents. Virtual exhibits were also possible for FMX, the National Conference, and chapter meetings which provided an "informational booth," surveys, and downloadable handouts. Resident-focused updates on initial and continuous certification were added and facilitated through chapters' established statewide lines of communication to residency programs and Family Medicine departments.

The pandemic required us to think "outside the box" to continue to provide easily accessible resources to affiliates and Diplomates alike. Additional enduring materials were developed (videos, handouts) that could be accessed by state chapters, residency programs, and others to help bridge the knowledge gap about ABFM

certification requirements and activities. A new website, Chapter Connect, was developed specifically for chapters as a 1-stop shop for information related to ABFM resources, chapter data reports, outreach opportunities, pilot materials, and support for conducting their own group Knowledge Self Assessments (KSAs) and adding chapter-sponsored Journal Clubs using the ABFM National Journal Club article assessments.

In 2022, we were able to return to in-person meetings, which are a far superior way to meet our goal of strengthening relationships with Diplomates. Still, we are not leaving virtual offerings behind as they allow additional, low-cost opportunities for bidirectional communication on a more continuous basis. Between the start of our outreach efforts and the end of this calendar year, ABFM will have engaged in 138 distinct outreach activities (Figure 1), but we are far from done. Future plans include expanding our effort to improve communication with more diverse groups, such as medical societies representing minority physicians, early and late career physicians, osteopathic physicians, subspecialty/CAQ holders, and Diplomates who are not AAFP members.

These early experiences with chapter outreach reinforced the value of developing strong relationships with family physicians as well as academic family medicine leaders and leaders of the other family medicine organizations. With support from the ABFM Board of Directors, a State Chapter Pilot Program was developed to create the opportunity for state chapters to request funding for new initiatives to advance work in areas which aligned with the major goals of the ABFM Strategic Plan. In the inaugural year, 11 chapters were funded for pilots which addressed a variety of topics (Table 1), culminating in an ABFM sponsored virtual Chapter Symposium in September 2021. This served a valuable purpose of sharing ideas and resources across all chapters. A second call for new chapter pilots was released in October 2021, with 5 additional chapters being added. Beyond financial support for these initiatives, ABFM supported these chapters with information, data, and speakers, and helped track their progress with phone calls and surveys throughout the pilot period.

Beyond the support for Chapters to engage in pilot projects that helped to meet their needs, these have also served a meaningful role that allowed ABFM to explore ways to further evolve and improve the experience of continuous certification for participating physicians. Some have tested the value of

Table 1. ABFM Chapter Pilots

Pilot Program Participant	Year(s) Participated	Program Focus
Alaska Academy of Family Physicians	2020 to 2021	Created a campaign demonstrating the scope and value of Family Medicine to high school and pre-med students. In addition helped to educate legislators, patients, and the general public on the scope of practice of Family Physicians and how their training compares with non-physician primary care providers.
California Academy of Family Physicians	2020 to 2021, 2022 to 2023	Created a model for linking knowledge obtained through CME and group KSAs to ABFM PI activity options, thus bridging learning and application of new knowledge to improving care in practice
Georgia Academy of Family Physicians	2020 to 2021	Created virtual learning activities for their members to enable CME and keeping up with certification during the pandemic. These piloting of a virtual member-wide journal club and virtual KSAs, as well as developing a model virtual resident research symposium
Illinois Academy of Family Physicians	2020 to 2021, 2022 to 2023	Provided targeted CME aimed at empowering diplomates improve health equity in their practices and the communities they serve.
Missouri Academy of Family Physicians	2020 to 2021	Focused on increasing student interest in Family Medicine by strengthening collaboration between FMIGs across the state and the statewide residency programs. Developed a unified tracking mechanism to monitor and evaluate FMIG interactions with pre-clinical medical students, setting a goal of 100 students per year
New Jersey Academy of Family Physicians	2020 to 2021	Focused on linking CME to practice improvement to increase immunization rates across the state using the <i>Standards for Adult Immunization</i> . Assisted members in implementing quality improvement methodologies in their practice.
North Carolina Academy of Family Physicians	2020 to 2021	Partnered with NCAHEC and the NC Pediatrics Society to offer a training to educate primary care physicians how to best provide telehealth solutions (methods, protocols, patient selection, documentation, billing, workflow, etc.) for their patients.
Ohio Academy of Family Physicians	2020 to 2021, 2022 to 2023	Planned and implemented an initiative focused on delivering personalized certification planning consultation for their members who are ABFM Diplomates. In addition worked to prepare residents for their initial certification stage out of training.
Oklahoma Academy of Family Physicians	2020 to 2021	Developed and implemented a two-day course for residents aimed at providing essential information on how to run or be part of a successful practice.
Oregon Academy of Family Physicians	2020 to 2021, 2022 to 2023	Developed a common curriculum for medical students and residents aimed at preparing future leaders to be strong advocates for patients, communities, and the value of primary care overall. Developed and implemented a model program to bring together family physicians, community-based organizations, and local public health offices to establish enduring working relationships and work together on projects aimed at improving community health needs related to inequities and social drivers of health.
South Dakota Academy of Family Physicians	2020 to 2021	Created a campaign demonstrating the scope and value of Family Medicine to high school and pre-med students. In addition helped to educate legislators, patients, and the general public on the scope of practice of Family Physicians and how their training compares with non-physician primary care providers.
Texas Academy of Family Physicians	2022 to 2023	Developed a resident-only version of their longstanding leadership program for their members, utilizing alumni of the program to mentor residents in their second or third year of residency.

Continued

Table 1. Continued

Pilot Program Participant	Year(s) Participated	Program Focus
Wisconsin Academy of Family Physicians	2022 to 2023	Developed and implemented programs focused on developing student and resident leadership and provided engagement opportunities for WAFP's student and resident members. In addition, expanded their Residency Visit program to include Wisconsin's medical school FMIG's

Abbreviations: KSA, Knowledge, skills and abilities model; CME, Continuing medical education; FMIG, Family medicine interest group.