



**Embargoed Until August 31, 2004
4 PM ET**



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JAMA Article Summarizes Relationship Between Physician Certification and Healthcare Quality and Presents Results of New Public Opinion Survey

Patients Trust Board Certification Over Family Recommendation of Physicians, According to Peer-Reviewed Paper and Gallup Poll

Philadelphia, PA – Patients trust physician board certification over the recommendations of family and friends, according to Gallup Poll results presented in the September 1 Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA).

The paper, by authors affiliated with the American Board of Internal Medicine (ABIM), summarizes how board certification is related to quality, reveals that the public views certification as an essential marker of physician quality, and describes how certification is becoming more comprehensive. The authors conclude that board certification should be among the key evidence-based measures used to pursue physician quality improvement.

The JAMA article presents general findings from a newly released Gallup public opinion poll about attitudes around physician qualifications. The poll reveals that patients highly value certification as an indicator of quality and that they would change or select physicians based on whether that doctor is certified. For example, when choosing a physician, three out of four adults surveyed would place board certification status above the recommendation of trusted family and friends. Over eighty percent of those surveyed would be likely to seek another physician if their current physician's certification lapsed. In addition, 83 percent said it was very important or important for practicing physicians to be evaluated by an independent board of physicians. Ninety percent said physicians should be frequently evaluated. Complete results for this poll, commissioned by the ABIM, are posted at www.abim.org and www.abms.org.

"We are pleased that patients place such importance on certification to evaluate physician quality," said Dr. Christine Cassel, JAMA author, and CEO and President of the ABIM. "By engaging in the certification process, physicians respond to the public's interest in knowing their physicians are committed to ongoing assessment and improvement of knowledge and skills. This is the essence of professionalism."

Ongoing efforts to measure and improve quality are consistent with what the public opinion poll revealed. As the science of performance assessment is becoming more robust, regulatory organizations and payers, including the federal Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, have launched efforts to assess individual physician quality.

"Given the evidence, we think certification and maintenance of certification should be an essential part of national efforts to improve quality of care," said Dr. Troyen Brennan, lead author of the JAMA article,

President of Brigham & Women's Physician Organization, and Chair of the ABIM. "Moreover, we should find ways to coordinate maintenance of certification with payer-based quality initiatives to reduce the duplication that physicians find so problematic."

The JAMA article summarizes literature about the validity of board certification, and finds compelling evidence on many fronts, including validity of the testing process, the relationship of examination scores with other measures of physician competency (such as type/length of training, supervisor assessment, and patient volume, among others), and, to some extent, the relationship between certification and clinical outcomes.

"The evidence base continues to grow and is multifaceted, which furthers the credibility of board certification," said Dr. Ralph Horwitz, JAMA author, Vice President for Medical Affairs and Dean of the Case Western Reserve University School of Medicine, and former Chair of ABIM.

Initial board certification relies heavily on a cognitive test and on evaluations by faculty in physician programs. To maintain certification, doctors must complete a program that fulfills new, comprehensive and rigorous requirements of the American Board of Medical Specialties (ABMS), the umbrella organization for the 24 major medical boards. A more expansive focus, introduced in 2003, now includes a requirement for lifelong learning and periodic self assessment, as well as an evaluation of performance in practice.

"Recertification is being transformed so that it can better assess the extent to which physicians practice within established guidelines," said Dr. Stephen Miller, Executive Vice President of ABMS. "It will continue to evolve to better meet patient and purchaser expectations, about what the research has shown, and the most essential question, 'How do I find a good doctor?'"

The American Board of Internal Medicine (ABIM) is the only recognized board in the specialty of internal medicine and is one of 24 certifying boards recognized by the American Board of Medical Specialties. The ABIM is an independent, not-for-profit organization whose certificates are recognized throughout the world as signifying a high level of physician competence.

The American Board of Medical Specialties (ABMS) is the umbrella organization for the 24 approved medical specialty boards in the United States. Established in 1933, the ABMS serves to coordinate the activities of its Member Boards and to provide information to the public, the government, the profession and its Members concerning issues involving specialization and certification in medicine. The mission of the ABMS is to maintain and improve the quality of medical care in the United States by assisting the Member Boards in their efforts to develop and utilize professional and educational standards for the evaluation and certification of physician specialists."

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