

# Why ABMS Member Board Certification Matters

“Higher Standards. Better Care.” Those words from the tagline of the American Board of Medical Specialties sum up the reasons that several of my colleagues and I serve as Public Members on the organization’s Board of Directors. We know all too well that the quality, safety and effectiveness of U.S. health care is far from what it should be. And we understand that Board Certification of the nation’s physicians, and Maintenance of Certification, are critical ingredients in the fundamental recipe of health system improvement.

Although the U.S. public may not fully understand all that is involved with Board Certification and Maintenance of Certification, many do expect their physicians to be well trained and continue to learn throughout their careers. Physicians have to be licensed to operate in individual states, and to maintain their licensure, but licensure alone doesn’t certify competency in a given medical specialty. Truthfully, Board Certification and Maintenance of Certification do not guarantee that a given physician consistently achieves superior clinical outcomes, but they increase the odds that he or she will.

The ribbon on the ABMS logo features the Latin phrase *Animis Opibusque Parati* – “prepared in knowledge and resources.” Latin may be dismissed as a “dead” language, but that sentiment has never had more real-life immediacy. With medical knowledge being reinvented almost daily, physicians and all other health care providers face supreme challenges in staying abreast of their fields. As Samuel Nussbaum, MD, chief medical officer at the insurer WellPoint, has noted, health care professionals today only make accurate treatment decisions about 50 percent of the time. By contrast, IBM’s Watson supercomputer, with a server now the size of a pizza box, can get decisions about medical utilization right 90 percent of the time – even if the machine is still tripped up by more complicated problems such as diagnosing cancer.

Faced with the growing mountain of medical knowledge, continued training and education, such as is demanded in the Maintenance of Certification process, are crucial to overcoming what MIT computer science expert Peter Szolovits described four decades ago as the “fundamental limitations of human memory and recall.” In other words, as long as there are human beings working in medicine, and not just supercomputers, the lifelong learning and on-going self-assessment inherent in Maintenance of Certification are the public’s best hope for achieving the high quality, professional health care we all seek – especially at those times in our lives when we need that care the most.



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