

Helping Patients and Consumers Understand the Value of Board Certification

A Meeting of ABIM's Non-Physician Governance Members

Meeting Overview

On Thursday, May 30, 2019, ABIM Governance members representing consumers, patients and allied health professionals met at ABIM's office in Philadelphia. The day-long meeting focused on the enhanced roles these members can play in support of ABIM. There were also discussions about how board certification is perceived and understood by the public, as well as opportunities to better define and share the importance of certification in the context of trust and quality of care.

Welcome

In his opening remarks, Planning Committee Chair Paul T. Conway, President of the American Association of Kidney Patients (AAKP), spoke about his own kidney transplant 23 years ago. He told how the experience of managing his kidney disease has affirmed his strong belief in the power of the individual to make changes.

Then he reviewed the goals of the meeting and emphasized that non-physicians can make valuable contributions to enhance the meaning of physician certification. He asked participants to think about the stories they each have and the lessons they might draw from their experiences. "We're not going to dwell on the negative, we're going to look at what the issues are and immediately think about how we could fix them," he said. "If you identify a negative, I'd encourage you to think about the opportunity there."

Richard Baron, MD, ABIM's President and CEO, spoke next and outlined the shift in thinking that prompted the organization to create a place for the patient voice in ABIM Governance. He noted that the role and importance of the patient is contested in some corners of medicine, and that much of the pushback against board certification comes from physicians who insist patients do not care about it. Reflecting on his own position at ABIM defending the importance of expertise in medicine, he acknowledged that ABIM has not always known how to involve groups outside of physicians. He shared his hope that the meeting would produce tools and ideas to help participants use their role in an impactful way.



ABIM Governance Members in attendance (back row, left to right): Benjamin Smith, Rheumatology Board; Paul T. Conway, Nephrology Board; Letitia Browne-James, Internal Medicine Board; Michael McDuffie, Critical Care Medicine; Craig Beam, Cardiovascular Board and Gary Bloom, Endocrinology, Diabetes and Metabolism Board. (front row, left to right): Laura Wingate, Gastroenterology Board; Joyce Dubow, Geriatric Medicine Board; Diane Blum, Hematology Board and Antigone Dempsey, Infectious Disease Board.

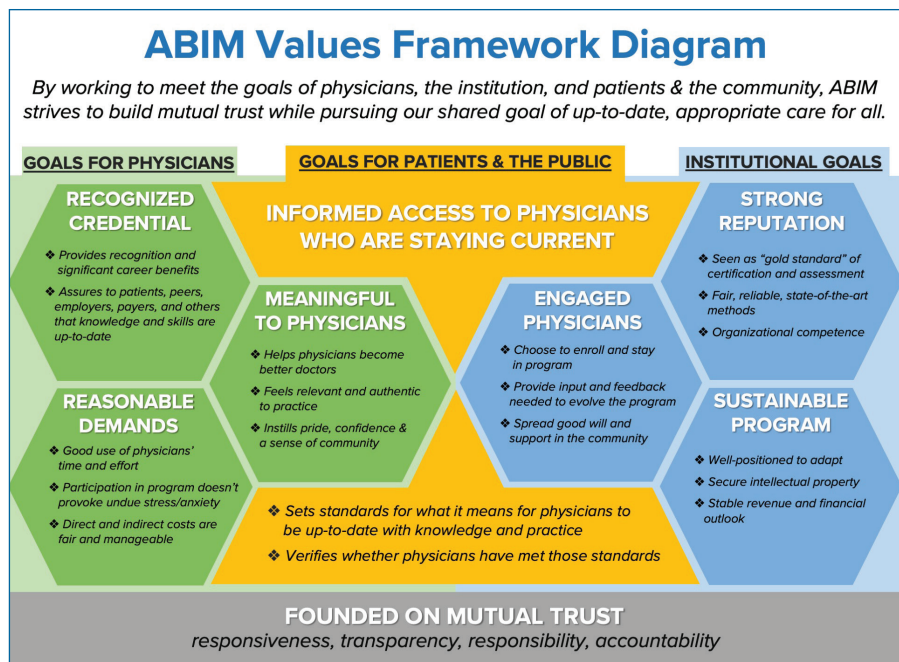
What People Are Saying About Health Care and Board Certification

The first morning session, presented jointly by Rich Waters, Vice President of Marketing and Communications at the American Board of Medical Specialties (ABMS) and Becky Watt Knight of the DC-based communications consulting firm McCabe Message Partners, focused on what various audiences are saying about board certification. They shared findings from a series of focus groups and interviews with key audiences along with results from a quantitative consumer research study. A key finding was that consumers know the term “board certification” but there is little understanding of the definition or how it differs from licensure.

They reported that a survey conducted by ABMS revealed that 98% of respondents expect their doctors to stay up to date, and 67% consider certification status when selecting a doctor. In the consumer focus groups, however, the general public expressed confusion about whether hospitals, the government or a different entity certifies physicians, and whether a physician must be certified in order to obtain a medical license. Participants believed physicians should be assessed regularly—and should want to be—according to a standard process. They agreed with statements including “expert care requires doctors to stay up-to-date” and “nationally recognized standards” but disagreed with “physicians will quit medicine because the requirements are too burdensome” and “board certification is a money-making scheme.” ABMS believes these are opportunities for further educating the public about the importance and meaning of certification, and is working to develop research-informed advertising and patient testimonials.

ABIM’s Values Framework

The meeting continued with an interactive session about ABIM’s Values Framework with Thor Odhner, Director of Diplomate Experience and Ben Chesluk, PhD, Senior Researcher for Ethnographic Research. In reviewing the Values Framework diagram, they explained that the tool is intended to visualize, prioritize, communicate and explain where ABIM’s values as an organization overlap with those of physicians and of the public. The diagram emerged from conversations with ABIM leaders as well as a series of interviews with Board Certified physicians.



Participants then had the opportunity to discuss the details of the diagram and framework, and how it could represent ABIM’s work in different settings. They noted that while the public might not be interested in ABIM’s business model, being a nonprofit organization is meaningful and should be made apparent. Drawing a distinction between Maintenance of Certification (MOC) and Continuing Medical Education (CME) could also help patients understand what their doctors do to stay current, as well as how ABIM engages with physicians about procedural requirements and exam content. Attendees were interested in how the Values Framework could be used externally, and how to distill some of the content into a concise summary about ABIM.

The Erosion of Trust in Medicine

Following the Values Framework session, ABIM Foundation staff Tim Lynch, JD, Senior Director of Foundation Programs and Wanda Motley Odom, Director of Communications, gave a presentation on the erosion of trust in medicine and how patients and the public could become part of the conversation. After showing Dr. Baron's recent [TEDx Talk video](#) on the topic of trust, they shared an overview of the Foundation's efforts to assemble a portfolio of programs and activities around trust in the US health system. The programs centered on the message that trust is both vital and bi-directional between doctors and patients. They also shared results of the ABIM Foundation's [Trust Practice Challenge](#), which recently awarded eight organizations for implementing impactful trust practices, and asked the group to think about major challenges to trust in medicine and how patients might help address them.

Board Certification – Telling a Compelling Story

Becky Watt Knight and Frank Walsh of McCabe Message Partners expanded on the trust topic with a storytelling exercise centered on the fact that consumers know they value board certification but are confused about the details. Honing in on the need for messages that are concise and memorable, they outlined the framework of “problem, solution, role, ask” and invited participants to think through messages that emphasize trust. Attendees' messages focused on the need to demonstrate empathy in the opening moments of a health-related interaction and that this was critical for establishing understanding and trust. They also suggested offering tools to new patients for selecting a provider, such as a checklist of topics and questions.

Mapping Out Communications Opportunities

The final session, led by Paul Conway, explored communications opportunities to advance positive messages about certification. He shared how AAKP strategizes stakeholder operations by thinking about which partner organizations have the greatest reach and potential to influence specific audiences. In reflecting on how technology and advocacy have changed, he noted that if ABIM can talk effectively about the value of certification and the importance of maintaining it, this voice for certification can become louder. He reiterated that the physician community should work together as a team because coordinated efforts over time will have a greater impact, and will provide information to the public faster and in a more impressionable way.

Closing Thoughts

To close the meeting, Furman McDonald, MD, Senior Vice President for Academic and Medical Affairs at ABIM, thanked attendees for engaging on the important question of what non-physician Governance members can bring to the table and what more they can do for ABIM. He echoed Dr. Baron's comments from the morning that adding consumers, patients and allied health professionals into ABIM's redesigned board structure was a revolutionary decision, and noted that should ABIM or ABMS go away, it is patients who have the most at stake. “Without you, we will be a weaker credential,” said Dr. Furman. He closed by saying that he felt confident the group would meet again and he looked forward to the continuation of their work.