New Practitioners Forum

Pursuing Board of Pharmacy Specialties certification

The vision for the future of pharmacy practice is that pharmacists will be acknowledged as health care professionals responsible for medication-use outcomes and disease management and that clinical pharmacy practitioners will become board-certified pharmacy specialists.1 The Board of Pharmacy Specialties (BPS) is the credentialing body that provides this specialty certification. BPS certification is a voluntary, peer-developed process in which pharmacists’ education, experience, knowledge, and skills in a particular practice area are confirmed by examination, beyond the requirements of licensure.

Certification options and eligibility information. There are currently five clinical specialty areas in which certification may be obtained: pharmacotherapy, nutrition support, oncology, psychiatry, and nuclear pharmacy. The recognition of a sixth specialty, ambulatory care, was recently announced, and the administration of this specialty examination will likely commence in 2011.2 There is also an option to earn “added qualifications” within the pharmacotherapy specialty in two specific areas, cardiology and infectious diseases, which involves a portfolio review process. As a new practitioner, certification in pharmacotherapy, with the credential board-certified pharmacotherapy specialist (BCPS), is an option upon completion of a postgraduate year 1 residency or after three years of practice experience after initial licensure if a practitioner spends at least 50% of his or her time in pharmacotherapy-related activities. Certification within the other specialty areas requires additional specialized training or documented practice experience.3 Pharmacotherapy certification is currently the most common BPS specialty pursued and earned.

Candidates may apply for BPS certification online. BPS certification examinations are administered annually on the first Saturday in October at designated sites nationally and internationally. Recertification, which is required every seven years, may be accomplished by examination or completion of continuing education, depending on the particular specialty area and the candidate’s preferences.

Potential benefits of certification. The potential value of BPS certification generally includes enhanced patient care and improved outcomes, increased therapeutics knowledge, increased competence and responsibility, greater acceptance by other health care professionals, enhanced professional and clinical opportunities (including qualification for full membership in the American College of Clinical Pharmacy [ACCP]), greater employer confidence and recognition, distinction within the profession, opportunities to participate in collaborative drug therapy management, prescriptive authority where applicable, tenure and merit salary increases, and greater marketability and monetary compensation. Earning board certification is also a recent ASHP postgraduate year 2 (PGY2) Residency Program Director standard.

Determining the optimal time to take the examination. In order to determine when and if pursuing BPS certification is right for you, it is important to consider the pros and cons of this decision, as well as your own professional and personal goals, learning preferences, and time management skills. You should discuss this option with your current or future employer, if applicable, as well as mentors, peers, family, and friends. Explore the ACCP and BPS websites and the resources available there. Ask questions and advice of those who have previously considered pursuing specialty certification.

In determining the optimal time to pursue BPS certification, there are several advantages to taking the examination during residency or early in your career. You may have better recall of general information earlier, and review-
ing and relearning concepts while studying for the examination may strengthen your knowledge base and benefit patients and other aspects of your current practice. In addition, the support and knowledge of more senior specialists and colleagues, as well as your peers, at your training or practice site may be valuable when preparing for specialty certification. Opportunities to participate in area review courses and study groups may be more accessible during your training or early in your career. If you do earn BPS certification, you may have the opportunity to help facilitate a BPS review course for future candidates, which current and potential future employers may appreciate. Many employers value BPS certification, and it may lead to increased consideration when applying for positions as you begin your career. Likewise, your example of pursuing specialty certification early on may encourage other pharmacists to do the same. Furthermore, it may actually be ideal to study for the examination during a period of training or orientation, when a new position may not be as demanding.

There are also several advantages of seeking BPS certification after the completion of a residency. It may be advantageous for you to have the knowledge and experience that a specialty residency or further practice expertise provides. In addition, the cost, time, and effort involved in applying and preparing for the BPS examination are not insignificant for a resident or new practitioner. It may not be practical to participate in a BPS review course during training or early in your career, as it may be challenging to balance this with the demands of patient care, projects, presentations, and other responsibilities. Furthermore, it may be difficult to study for the BPS examination if you are relocating, training for a new position, or becoming acclimated to a new area. Waiting until you are more established to take the examination may avoid any concern for creating hierarchical divisions among residents, preceptors, and other pharmacists. Your supervisors may be more supportive of your pursuit of BPS certification after your training has been completed or after you have settled into a new position and may view preparing for the examination earlier as time and effort devoted to an optional endeavor outside of required professional responsibilities.

**Preparation for the examination.** If you decide to pursue BPS certification, plan to devote at least two months to studying for the examination. ACCP offers a BCPS review course, Updates in Therapeutics: The Pharmacotherapy Preparatory Course, in two formats: live and home study. The live course is offered once a year in conjunction with the ACCP Spring Practice and Research Forum, usually held in April. The home study materials are typically available after June 1 and in a variety of media. It is also important to consider your own individual learning preferences and how you learn and study best: You may feel more comfortable with some content areas than others and may choose to spend more time on topics with which you are less familiar. You may prefer to study individually or in groups, which are most effective if they are focused and directed and highlight...
information likely to appear on the examination. Study groups may have more senior practitioners lead reviews of sections or have group members review and present topics themselves, or a combination of both.

You should review the candidate’s guide and content outline for your intended specialty, which delineates domains, tasks, and knowledge statements, and complete the brief practice examination for the specific certification area, all of which are available at no cost on the BPS website. During our study, we prepared a calendar with topics to cover during the two months we set aside and purchased the portable digit format version of the pharmacotherapy preparatory course, which we found very helpful. We studied for the examination individually and in small groups in the evenings and on weekends, so as not to interfere with our daytime professional responsibilities. You should closely study two ACCP publications contained within the Pharmacotherapy Preparatory Course: “Types of Economic and Humanistic Outcomes Assessments” and “Policy, Practice, and Regulatory Issues,” in addition to the therapeutics information.4 We suggest reviewing references contained at the end of each study section for topic-specific questions or clarifications. We also advise candidates to read the article by Barratt et al.,5 which discusses important statistical concepts.

As you are studying for the examination, keep in mind that most candidates for board certification in pharmacotherapy are successful in this endeavor and that the pass rate for both the 2008 and 2007 examinations was approximately 72%.6,7

What to expect during and after the examination. On examination day, you will need to bring your admission permit, which you will receive upon the approval of your application, a scientific calculator, pencils, and your personal identification to the testing site. The examination consists of 200 multiple-choice questions and is administered in two sections. It is completed with pencil and paper. Expect to be there a full day, from approximately 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. After completing the first section of the examination, you will be given a break for lunch on your own around midday and then return to complete the second section. You may leave when you have completed the second section and a short evaluation. You will not learn anything about your score for at least two months.

Do not become distraught if you are concerned that you did not perform your best on the examination, as the scoring is quite involved and depends on the results of everyone else taking the examination that day. Your results will be mailed to you but will not be released over the phone. You will initially receive your score report in the mail and if successful, your certificate and lapel pin shortly thereafter.

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