

Policy Brief: Licensing Pathways for Internationally Trained Physicians and National Standards for Specialty Medical Care

Introduction

In response to physician workforce shortages, more than a dozen states have passed legislation to create new pathways for internationally trained physicians to obtain licenses to practice medicine in the United States. Traditionally, U.S. physicians obtain a medical license during graduate medical education (GME) training at an accredited specialty training program. These new pathways challenge the traditional role of U.S.-based GME training by offering licenses to physicians already practicing in other countries. This shift necessitates alternative methods to ensure these physicians can provide the high-quality care expected by U.S. patients.

Importance of U.S.-Based GME

U.S.-based GME programs, accredited by the Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education (ACGME), build on the foundational education received in medical school. These programs provide a structured environment in which licensed physicians acquire essential knowledge and skills for safe, effective patient care in a medical and/or surgical specialty. Training typically spans three to seven years, during which physicians are continually assessed to ensure competency in essential skills and procedures. Successful completion of this training is followed by an evaluation from independent medical specialty boards that certify a physician's readiness to practice safely and competently.

Certification vs. Licensure

- **Medical Licensure:** A legal requirement to practice medicine, reflecting that a physician has met minimum standards to diagnose and treat patients. Licensure requirements vary by state but generally include an additional year of training beyond medical school.
- **Physician Certification:** A voluntary process that builds on licensure, requiring additional specialty training, rigorous examinations, adherence to high professional standards, and ongoing education. Certification by medical specialty boards is highly valued for employment and payment decisions, reflecting a higher standard of competency and quality.

Requirements for New Licensure Pathways

State medical boards and other stakeholders have recommended requirements for these new pathways to include, at a minimum:

- An employment offer prior to application by an institution with experience in physician education and training;
- Educational Commission for Foreign Medical Graduates (ECFMG) certification and graduation from a recognized medical school (including passage of the United States Medical Licensing Examinations®);
- Evidence of substantially similar post-graduate training based on national standards for U.S.-based GME;
- Unrestricted medical license in another country with at least three years of full-time practice in the same specialty the physician plans to practice in the U.S.;
- No more than two years of time out of clinical practice; and
- A two-year provisional licensure period under supervision of a board-certified physician in the same specialty.

Additional Recommendations from the American Board of Medical Specialties (ABMS)

ABMS recommends that the following requirements be included in the new pathways:

1. **Initial Assessment:** Rigorous evaluation of knowledge, cognitive and procedural skills, and professional behaviors by an independent organization with expertise in the medical/surgical specialty in which the internationally trained physician plans to practice.
2. **Supervision and Progressive Assessment:** Continuous observation and assessment by board-certified physicians during the provisional period, using tools developed by ACGME-accredited training programs.



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- 3. Access to Training:** Mechanism to address gaps in knowledge and skills through training provided by certified physicians with expertise in the specialty.
- 4. Final Assessment:** Comprehensive evaluation by an independent organization to determine competence in the specialty before issuing an unrestricted medical license.

Next Steps Toward Physician Board Certification

ABMS specialty boards are committed to maintaining the highest standards for the medical profession and protecting public safety. Without access to board certification in a specialty, ABMS is concerned that newly licensed internationally trained physicians will not have the same access as other board-certified physicians have to employment opportunities or a structured program of continuing professional development. As a result, they are at great risk of experiencing disparities in compensation and professional growth. In addition, patients may be confused about the qualifications of these physicians and their ability to meet the current standards for practice in their specialty.

ABMS and national medical specialty societies are committed to working together to develop the tools and resources necessary to help internationally trained physicians meet national standards for medical/surgical specialties. If all the aforementioned recommendations for licensure of these individuals are enacted, the majority of ABMS Member Boards can foresee the development of pathways to certification that maintain the high standards and rigor for ABMS certification and demonstrate to patients and the public that their physicians have the skills and knowledge necessary to provide safe and competent care.

Improving Access to Health Care

While ABMS supports developing certification pathways for qualified internationally trained physicians, it emphasizes that additional licensure pathways alone will not solve health care access issues. Solutions must address the cost of medical education and specialty training, lack of services in underserved areas, administrative burdens, and health care payment structures. National standards for specialty training and care are crucial to ensure high-quality, patient-centered care across all states.

Conclusion

Adhering to national standards for specialty medical care is essential to protect patient safety and maintain standards for high-quality health care. Variability in state standards could exacerbate health care access issues and compromise care quality. The medical community, including ABMS and national specialty societies, is committed to partnering with legislators, medical societies, policymakers, and patient advocates to develop comprehensive solutions to these challenges.