Differences Between Subspecialty Certification and Focused Practice Designation

Subspecialty certification relates to a specific component of a specialty to which a practicing physician or medical specialist (also known as diplomates) may devote a significant portion of time. Practice in the subspecialty follows special educational experience – an ACGME-accredited training program of at least one (1) year in duration – in addition to that required for general certification. Focused practice designation recognizes the value that diplomates who focus some or all of their practice within a specific area of a specialty and/or subspecialty can provide to improving health care. These areas may be the focus of some or all of a diplomate's practice. They are more limited in scope than those covered by subspecialty certification or may be procedural but without the extensive scientific, clinical, and organizational underpinnings of a separate subspecialty.

	SUBSPECIALTY CERTIFICATION	FOCUSED PRACTICE DESIGNATION
Description	The credential granted by a Member Board to a diplomate for successfully completing and maintaining the Member Board requirements for the subspecialty.	The credential granted by a Member Board to a diplomate who demonstrates additional expertise and continued focus in a particular area of a specialty or subspecialty.

Purpose	• Recognizes an identifiable component of a specialty to which a diplomate may devote a significant portion of time
	• Incorporates specific and identifiable body of knowledge that may include certain procedural skills or practice modes but must not be limited only to training in a technical skill.
	• Requires additional fellowship training.
		• Allows Member Boards to innovate and recognize areas of practice within existing specialties and subspecialties that either:
		  • evolve as diplomates progress throughout their professional careers or emerge as medicine changes due to advances in medical knowledge,
		  • are more limited in scope than those covered by the subspecialty certification credential or
		  • may be procedural but without the extensive scientific, clinical, and organizational underpinnings of a separate subspecialty.
		• Expertise in these areas is gained through clinical experience and may include formal training.
		• Serves to provide rigor of Member Board credentialing process for non ACGME-Accredited training programs.
		• Relates to some or all of a diplomate's practice

Eligibility	Initial certification in a subspecialty requires diplomates to have: • Current unrestricted license. • Certification in a specialty of a Member Board. • At least one (1) year of ACGME-accredited fellowship training.	Focused practice designation requires diplomates to have: • Active specialty/subspecialty certificate. • Meet continuing certification requirements. • Expertise gained through clinical experience, which may include formal training.
Assessment	Initial certification examination and other assessment(s) as defined by the Member Board.	Member Board-based assessment.
Continuing Certification	Board-specified; covering range of the subspecialty.	Board-specified; may be tailored to area of focused practice; includes maintaining the required specialty/subspecialty certification.
Reporting	Reported as a subspecialty certificate.	Reported as a Focused Practice Designation
Co-sponsorship	Scope of practice does not vary based on specialty of the diplomate.	Scope of practice may vary based on specialty or subspecialty certification.

© 2026 American Board of Medical Specialties® (ABMS®) (11/26)