

M E M O R A N D U M

DATE: November 16, 1972

TO: State Medical Associations  
State Medical Licensing Authorities  
Directors of Physician's Assistant Programs  
Other Concerned Groups and Individuals

FROM: Malcolm C. Todd, M.D., Chairman  
Council on Health Manpower

Subject: Certification of the Assistant to the Primary  
Care Physician: A Status Report

The purpose of this special communication is to report on progress to date in developing a national program of certification, based on proficiency testing, for the assistant to the primary care physician.

The attached article on "National Certification of Physician's Assistants by Uniform Examination" discusses in detail the rationale for such a certification program, and outlines the major developmental steps involved.

At the AMA's November 1971 Clinical Convention, the House of Delegates directed the AMA through its Council on Health Manpower to assume a leadership role in developing a national program for the certification of the assistant to the primary care physician who functions at the highest level of responsibility described by the National Academy of Sciences as a "Type A" assistant. The House noted that such a program, which would grant certification on the basis of nationally validated examinations to individuals of both traditional and unorthodox educational backgrounds, would help to ensure orderly development of the physician's assistant concept under medical guidance, thereby helping to assure the maintenance of high standards. In follow-up to this action, discussions were held by the Council with a number of nationally recognized testing organizations concerning the feasibility of developing a proficiency examination. It was the consensus that (a) the development of a proficiency examination for the assistant to the primary care physician is not only feasible but timely, and (b) an advisory body or bodies should be established at the outset to make decisions on important policy matters and to serve as the authoritative body to negotiate for examination construction and funding support.

At its April, 1972 meeting, the AMA Board of Trustees formally approved a recommendation from the Council on Health Manpower that it collaborate with the National Board of Medical Examiners in development of a certification examination. Concurrently, the National Board of Medical Examiners, at its Annual Meeting, had recognized the urgent

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need to develop valid and reliable certification examinations for this category of health personnel and had directed the staff to take appropriate steps to meet this need. It was agreed by both groups that AMA would establish a national advisory body on the physician's assistant to counsel the AMA and the National Board in general policy decisions concerning the certification program. In addition, the National Board would appoint such committees as it deem necessary to deal with development of the certification examination, and there would be interlocking membership between the AMA advisory body and the National Board committees.

In June, a 19-member special Study Committee for the Evaluation of Physician's Assistants was established under the NBME, to begin development of the certification examination. This Committee is now engaged in identifying all health care tasks which the assistant to the primary care physician should be able to perform, as the basis for subsequent development of test items for the examination.

In addition, a new ad hoc Advisory Committee on the Physician's Assistant has been appointed by the AMA, to advise the Council on Health Manpower on development of the certification program and on such related issues as terminology, continuing competence, relationships with physician's assistant organizations, and prerequisites for the certification examination.

Construction of a valid and reliable test instrument is a complex process, but it is hoped that the certification examination will be available for first administration before the end of 1973. When available, such certification by nationally recognized medical organizations will help maintain high standards in the occupation, will provide the potential physician employer with evidence of competency, and will enhance the career and geographic mobility of the assistant to the primary care physician by providing nationally-recognized credentials.

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