

# Dermatology Continuing Certification Changes for the Better

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Major changes in continuing board certification are occurring across medical specialties. On January 6, 2020, the American Board of Dermatology (ABD) launches its new web-based longitudinal assessment program called CertLink (<https://abderm.mycertlink.org/>).<sup>1</sup> This new platform is designed to eventually replace the sit-down, high-stakes, once-every-10-year medical knowledge examination that dermatologists take to remain board certified. With this alternative, every participating dermatologist will receive a batch of 13 web-based questions every quarter that he/she may answer at a convenient time and place. Questions are answered one at a time or in batches, depending on the test taker's preference, and can be completed on home or office computers (and eventually on smartphones). Participating in this type of testing does not require shutting down practice, traveling to a test center, or paying for expensive board review courses. CertLink is designed to be convenient, affordable, and relevant to an individual's practice.

## How did the ABD arrive at CertLink?

The ABD launched its original Maintenance of Certification (MOC) program in 2006. Since then, newly board-certified dermatologists, recertifying dermatologists with time-limited certificates, and time-unlimited dermatologists who volunteered to participate in MOC have experienced the dermatology MOC program. In its first 10 years, the program was met with very mixed reviews. The program was designed to assess and promote competence in a 4-part framework, including professionalism; commitment to lifelong learning and self-assessment; demonstration of knowledge, judgment, and skills; and improvement in medical practice. All 4 are areas of rational pursuit for medical professionals seeking to perform and maintain the highest quality patient care possible. But there were problems. First iterations are rarely perfect, and dermatology MOC was no exception.

At the onset, the ABD chose to oversee the MOC requirements and remained hands off in the delivery of education, relying instead on other organizations to fulfill the ABD's requirements. Unfortunately, with

limited educational offerings available, many diplomates paid notable registration fees for each qualifying MOC activity. Quality improvement activities were a relatively new experience for dermatologists and were time consuming. Required medical record reviews were onerous, often requiring more than 35 data points to be collected per medical record reviewed. The limited number and limited diversity of educational offerings also created circumstances in which the material covered was not maximally relevant to many participants. When paying to answer questions about patient populations or procedure types never encountered by the dermatologist who purchased the particular MOC activity, many asked the question "How does this make me a better doctor?" They were right to ask.

Cost, time commitment to participate in MOC, and relevance to practice were 3 key areas of concern for many dermatologists. In response to internal and external MOC feedback, in 2015 the ABD took a hard look at its 10-year experience with MOC. While contemplating its next strategies, the ABD temporarily put its component 4—practice improvement—requirements on hold. After much review, the ABD decided to take over a notable portion of the education delivery. Its goal was to provide education that would fulfill MOC requirements in a more affordable, relevant, quicker, and easier manner.

First, the ABD made the decision to assume a more notable role as educator, in part to offer qualifying activities at no additional cost to diplomates. By taking on the role as educator, 3 major changes resulted: the way ABD approached quality improvement activities, partnership to initiate a question-of-the-week self-assessment program, and initiation of a longitudinal assessment strategy that resulted in this month's launch of CertLink.

The ABD revolutionized its quality improvement requirements with the launch of its practice improvement modules made available through its website.<sup>2</sup> These modules utilize recently published clinical practice gaps in 5 dermatology subspecialty domains to fulfill the practice improvement requirements. Participants read a brief synopsis of the supporting literature explaining practice improvement recommendations found in the

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module. Next, they find 5 patients in their practice with the condition, medication, or process in question and review whether they provided the care supported by the best available evidence. No module requires more than 5 medical records to review, and no more than 3 questions are answered per medical record review. If review confirms that the care was appropriate, no further action is needed. If a care gap is identified, then participants implement changes and later remeasure practice to detect any change. This certification activity was incredibly popular with the thousands of diplomates who have participated thus far; more than 97% stated the modules were relevant to practice, 98% stated they would recommend the modules to fellow dermatologists, and nearly 25% reported the module helped to change their practice for the better (unpublished data, July 2019). Relevance had been restored.

The ABD worked closely with the American Academy of Dermatology (AAD) to develop new education for weekly self-assessment. The ABD created the content and delivered to the AAD the first year of material for what would become the most successful and popular dermatology CME activity in history: the AAD Question of the Week (QOW). Thousands of dermatologists are registered to receive the QOW, with very active weekly participation. Participants receive 1 self-assessment point and 0.25 CME credits for each attempted question, right or wrong. This quizzing tool also was educational, with explanation of right answers and wrong choices included. The average amount of time spent answering each question was approximately 40 seconds. American Academy of Dermatology members can participate in its QOW as a member benefit. Self-assessment is no longer a time-consuming or costly process.

The third major change was the ABD initiation of the longitudinal assessment strategy called CertLink, a web-based testing platform operated by the American Board of Medical Specialties. Longitudinal assessment differs from traditional certification and recertification assessment. It allows the test taker to answer the certification test questions over time instead of all at once. Longitudinal assessment not only provides a greater level of convenience to the test taker but also allows boards a more continuous set of touch points in the assessment of diplomates over the course of the continuing certification period.

### What will be part of CertLink?

In addition to standard multiple-choice questions, there are many interesting elements to the CertLink program, such as article-based questions. At the beginning of each year, dermatologists select 8 articles from a list of those hosted by CertLink. These are recently published articles, chosen for their meaningfulness to practicing dermatologists. Each subsequent quarter, 2 of these articles are issued to the diplomate to read at his/her leisure. Once ready, participants launch and answer 2 questions about the key points of each article. The article-based questions

were designed to help the practicing dermatologist stay up-to-date and relevant in personally chosen areas.

Diplomates are offered a chance to learn from any question that was missed, with explanations or resources provided to help them understand why the correct answer is correct. In this new learn-to-competence model, diplomates are not penalized the first time they answer a particular question incorrectly. Each is provided an opportunity to learn through the explanations given, and then in a future quarter, the dermatologist is given a second chance to answer a similarly themed question, with only that second chance counting toward his/her overall score.

Another unique aspect of CertLink is the allowance of time off from assessment. The ABD recognizes that life happens, and that intermittent time off from career-long assessment will be necessary to accommodate life events, including but not limited to maternity leave, other medical leave, or mental health breaks. Diplomates may take off up to 1 quarter of testing each year to accommodate such life events. Those who need extra time (beyond 1 quarter per year) would need to communicate directly with ABD to request. Those who continue to answer questions throughout the year will have their lowest-performing quarter dropped, to maximize fairness to all. Only the top 3 quarters of CertLink test performance will be counted each year when making certification status decisions. Those who take 1 quarter off will have their other 3 quarters counted toward their scoring.

### How will CertLink measure performance?

At the onset of CertLink, there is no predetermined passing score. It will take a few years for the ABD psychometricians to determine an acceptable performance. Questions are written not to be tricky but rather to assess patient issues the dermatologist is likely to encounter in practice. Article-based questions are designed to assess the key points of important recent articles to advance the dermatologist's practice.

### Final Thoughts

In the end, the ABD approach to the new area of continuing certification centers on strategies to be relevant, inexpensive, and minimally disruptive to practice, and to teach to competence and advance practice by bringing forward articles that address key recent literature. We think it is a much better approach to dermatology continuing certification.

### REFERENCES

1. ABD announces CertLink launch in 2020 [news release]. Newton, MA: American Board of Dermatology; 2019. <https://www.abderm.org/public/announcements/certlink-2020.aspx>. Accessed December 17, 2019.
2. American Board of Dermatology. Focused practice improvement modules. <https://www.abderm.org/diplomates/fulfilling-moc-requirements/abd-focused-pi-modules-for-moc.aspx>. Accessed December 18, 2019.