

Beefed-Up Help Desk

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that began in 2004, each family physician was required to complete six Self-Assessment Modules (SAMs) and one Performance in Practice Module (PPM)—or a practice improvement module created by the American Academy of Family Physicians—before sitting for the recertification examination in the sixth or seventh year.

Now, family physicians have the option of completing two SAMs—which will now be known as Part II modules—and one PPM—now known as a Part IV module—in three separate three-year windows, or stages, before recertifying in the 10th year.

The SAM process itself also has been updated with an “off-line” option. Rather than having to sit at a computer for several hours answering the 60 questions in the module, “now you can download and print it out and complete it at your leisure, and then go back online and plug the answers in,” Mr. Cattoi explained.

Dr. Feldman expressed concern that there is still no perfect option for older physicians who may not be computer literate or who do not have high-speed Internet access.

The ABFM also has beefed up its help desk, which is now open from 8:30 a.m. to 9 p.m., Monday through Friday, and 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. on Saturday.

“We have a group of about nine people we’ve trained, and usually there are anywhere from three to five people [at the help desk],” with more available if the board has just sent out a mailing or it’s a peak time, Mr. Cattoi said. The help desk is available by e-mail at help@theabfm.org or by calling toll free at 877-223-7437.

The cost of certification is another issue. ABFM President Dr. James C. Puffer said that “the annualized costs for the 10-year program are less than current annualized costs for 7-year program,” but he declined to say what the actual costs would be. An April 2004 article in Washington Academy of Family Physicians journal, written by then-board treasurer Dr. Thomas Norris, listed the costs of seven-year recertification at \$1,150 if paid in a lump sum, \$1,400 if paid in \$200 annual installments for seven years, or \$1,500 under a “pay-as-you-go” system of \$50 per year for seven years plus an additional \$1,150 in the seventh year for the exam.

Dr. John Maggiore, a family doctor in Lenoir, N.C., was generally positive about his experience with maintenance of certification. While he didn’t mind the 60-question part of the test, he agreed that the patient simulation “was a bit of a farce. It

takes a long time to do it, and I would find out the same amount of information if I talked to the patient for three minutes.”

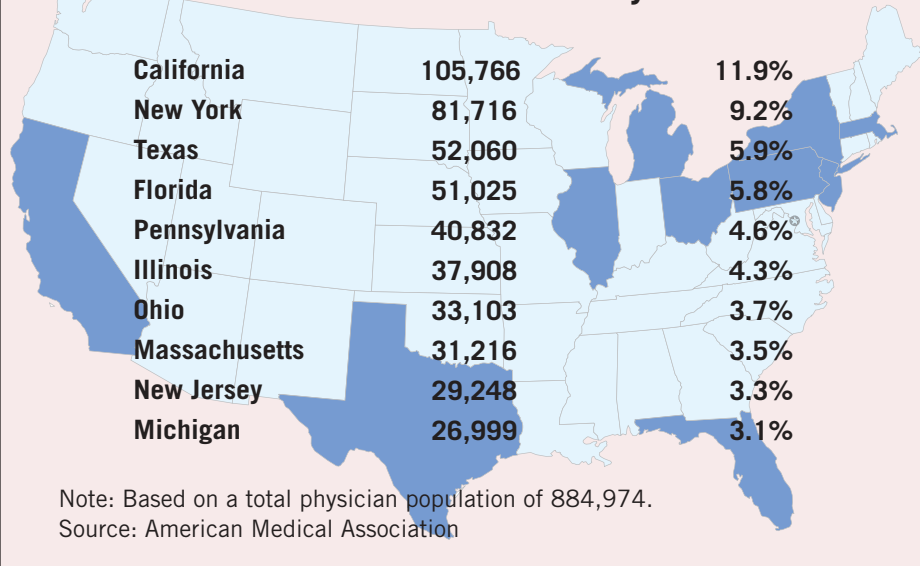
Now that all of these changes have been made, will more family physicians decide to recertify? “The number of people taking the recertification examination remains at the historical levels where we had seen it for the last year,” Dr. Puffer said.

Dr. Feldman said he thinks the changes

will make a difference. “Some doctors will be accepted by insurance companies whether they are board certified or not, because they need doctors in that [geographic] area,” he said. “So those people are going to quit, because it was just something they did because they had pride in profession and in their continuing medical education. I don’t think the board would ever make those individuals happy.” ■

DATA WATCH

Ten States Accounted for 55% of All Physicians in 2004



California	105,766	11.9%
New York	81,716	9.2%
Texas	52,060	5.9%
Florida	51,025	5.8%
Pennsylvania	40,832	4.6%
Illinois	37,908	4.3%
Ohio	33,103	3.7%
Massachusetts	31,216	3.5%
New Jersey	29,248	3.3%
Michigan	26,999	3.1%

Note: Based on a total physician population of 884,974.
Source: American Medical Association

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