

Subspecialty Certification in Advanced Pediatric Anesthesiology

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The opinions expressed here are Dr. Clark's and do not represent the official positions or policies of the American Society of Anesthesiologists.

Here is a brief update on activities related to the Society for Pediatric Anesthesia's application to the American Board of Anesthesiology (ABA) for subspecialty certification in advanced pediatric anesthesiology.

As previously discussed in the newsletter, the SPA application went to the ABA last summer. In the fall of 2007, the ABA asked the American Society of Anesthesiologists (ASA) and other anesthesiology organizations for their opinion on the issue. The ASA, in turn, considered the issue at the ASA Board of Directors meeting in February of this year.

The ASA Board heard extensive testimony and debate on the subject. Unfortunately, the Board voted to oppose the application. As is normal for all ASA Board actions, the February decision will now go to the ASA House of Delegates at the October ASA Annual Meeting in Orlando where it will be ratified, modified, or overturned.

It was a disappointment to this writer that the ASA Board of Directors chose to take this position at this time. The ABA had made it clear in written and verbal communications that it would solicit input on the application from all interested parties and organizations through the end of 2008. It was explicitly clear that the ABA's timing was structured in a way to allow the ASA House of Delegates an opportunity to fully consider the issue in the fall and to give its collective opinion at that time. The February ASA Board decision does not seem to add to this process other than to now create a somewhat taller hurdle for the advocates of subspecialty certification to overcome.

The reasons for opposition are well known. Many feel that subspecialty certification is simply unnecessary; that ABA Board Certification confers qualifications in all of the subspecialty areas of anesthesiology. Others are concerned that subspecialty certification will imply that only certificate holders are qualified to provide anesthesia care for pediatric patients. This is neither the intent nor the desire of those advocating for subspecialty certification. As a result of these concerns and based on suggestions made at the February ASA Board meeting, the SPA Board of Directors voted at its meeting in April to change the title and focus of the application to subspecialty certification in advanced pediatric anesthesiology.

An interesting additional concern is raised by those who say that subspecialty certification creates a legal hazard for those practicing

in pediatric anesthesiology without the certificate of special qualifications. It is difficult to assess the validity of this concern. However, we do have the experience of other medical specialties that have gone down this road. In reviewing the available literature, and in discussing the issue with pediatric specialists in other areas of medicine, it does not appear that subspecialty certification has been a problem as far as legal liability is concerned. In medical malpractice actions, physicians are judged on whether or not their decisions and actions meet the prevailing standard of care. It matters little what sort of certifications one holds.

The final area of concern is voiced by those who run hospital departments and academic programs. Some of these leaders share a concern that the creation of another subspecialty area will make their staffing situations more difficult. Realistically though, subspecialty certification in pediatric anesthesiology should be no greater burden for program directors than those they face with the current subspecialty areas; critical care, pain, and palliative medicine. There is not, nor is there likely to be, a "Board police" checking programs to make sure they have some arbitrary level of subspecialty certificate holders.

The advantages of subspecialty certification are very real. Just like Board certification in general and the current ABA-recognized subspecialty areas in particular, subspecialty certification in advanced pediatric anesthesiology will provide a means to gauge the knowledge and problem-solving ability of those practicing in a distinct and very well-defined area of medicine. There can be no doubt that once subspecialty certification in pediatric anesthesiology exists, it will raise the bar for all practicing within the specialty. That, in turn, can only benefit our patients.

Though not as momentous as the issues currently facing our nation and our planet, this is still very much an issue worth the fight. For many, subspecialty certification in advanced pediatric anesthesiology is the next logical step in the development of our specialty. Rather than being seen as a disruptive threat, it should be seen as a means to improve the quality of those who choose to practice our special brand of anesthesiology, and by extension, the care we deliver for our pediatric patients.

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