

Raising the Bar:

Why Board Certification for RNs Matters

Board certified RNs are raising the bar – improving patient care and outcomes, elevating the efficient and effective delivery of health care, advancing nursing and specialty practice, and creating centers of excellence wherever they work.

This white paper describes why RN licensure alone increasingly falls short, how board certification bridges the gap and delivers significant benefits, and why organizations dedicated to developing certified RN workforces are meeting consumer expectations and giving themselves an economic and competitive advantage.



A White Paper from the Board of Certification for Emergency Nursing

Health Care is a Team Sport, and Every RN Needs to Be at the Top of Their Game

The nation's 3-million-strong registered nurse (RN) workforce¹ is the backbone — not to mention, the eyes, ears and heart — of the U.S. healthcare system. Nurses have the most patient contact, serve as the primary caregivers and care coordinators, and are uniquely positioned to intervene early when necessary. As a result, RNs are a key driver of safety, quality and the patient experience.

Fast Facts: Of the nation's 4 million RNs, over 3.2 million are employed in nursing.¹

Rapidly expanding knowledge and evolving technologies, coupled with a highly complex healthcare delivery system, mean that continuous, career-long learning for RNs is not only essential, it is the responsibility of every organization.

"Having the very best, most current healthcare professionals at the bedside and in practice benefits patients," said **Richard E. Hawkins, MD, president and CEO of the American Board of Medical Specialties (ABMS)**, which represents over 900,000 board certified physicians. "It is the entire healthcare team that patients rely upon for their care and treatment."

"Employers and healthcare professionals, payors and regulators, communities, and the public-at-large are also beneficiaries when nurses and physicians are at the top of their practice," said **Janie Schumaker, MBA, BSN, RN, CEN, CENP, CPHQ, FABC, executive director, Board of Certification for Emergency Nursing (BCEN), and president, American Board of Nursing Specialties (ABNS)**, which represents nearly 930,000 board certified nurses.

But, beyond facility- and unit-based onboarding and basic training requirements, what is in place to ensure that RNs stay apace of generalist knowledge and best practices, let alone come up the learning curve in specialized practice?

RNs Aiming Higher

Licensure is the Baseline

RN licensure benefits the public and individual nurses by setting "minimal qualifications and competencies for safe entry-level practitioners."² To become an RN, graduates of a diploma, associate degree (ADN) or bachelor's degree (BSN) program must pass a standardized national exam affirming they possess that "minimum technical competency for safe entry into basic nursing practice."³

However, RN licensure rules, and renewal requirements in particular, vary by state. While most states require RNs to complete roughly a dozen to several dozen contact hours to demonstrate continued competence during each renewal period (typically every 2 years), for more than a few states there are no CE requirements.⁴ Also, most states do not require active practice.

BSN Preparation is Gaining Steam

Advocacy for RNs to be bachelor-prepared dates back at least to the 1960s.⁵ Recognizing that RNs need multiple core competencies, IOM's 2010 Future of Nursing report called for 80% of RNs to have a BSN degree by 2020.⁶ Yet IOM-inspired "BSN in 10" bills requiring RNs earn a BSN or higher within 10 years of initial RN licensure have so far only passed into law in one state — New York.⁷ All branches of the U.S. Armed Forces now require a BSN or higher to practice as an active duty RN.⁸ In the private sector, more healthcare facilities are requiring a BSN for entry level RN positions.

Overall, progress has been slow but appears to be gaining steam. The Future of Nursing Campaign for Action dashboard shows the percent of employed nurses who are BSN-prepared has risen from 49% in 2010 to 51% in 2015 to 57% in 2018.⁹ Similarly, the biennial National Nursing Workforce Study reports a trend toward a higher percentage of RNs whose initial nursing degree is a BSN.⁹

More RNs Are Board Certified

Meanwhile, more new nurses are making board certification an early-career goal, and more seasoned nurses are making the choice to be recognized for their hard-earned experience and expertise. Although specialty certification does not equate to or replace an academic degree, earning a board credential is a substantive and impactful professional development achievement that can be attained in relatively short order and at a significantly lower cost.

"Once RNs are board certified, they are more likely to practice at the top of their specialty and be in the groove to stay that way," said **BCEN and ABNS head Janie Schumaker**.

Setting a Higher Standard: The Pursuit of Board Certification

Certification, as defined by the American Board of Nursing Specialties (ABNS), is “the formal recognition of the specialized knowledge, skills and experience demonstrated by the achievement of standards identified by a nursing specialty to promote optimal health outcomes.”

Like board certification for physicians, board certification for RNs, also referred to as specialty certification, is a voluntary process undertaken by nurses who are highly committed to the profession and their specialty practice. Upon passing a rigorous, national certification exam that spans a well-defined specialty body of knowledge, RNs earn a professional credential to be displayed with their academic credentials.

Validation of Mastery

“One of the central goals of certification is to demonstrate, and thus assure the public, that a nurse has met established standards in a nursing specialty,” said **Marianne Horahan, MBA, MPH, RN, NEA-BC, CPHQ, CAE, director, Certification Services and ANA Enterprise Customer Service, American Nurses Credentialing Center (ANCC)**. Horahan is also president of the Accreditation Board for Specialty Nursing Certification (ABSNC), the only accrediting body specifically for nursing certification.

“The most powerful thing about a specialty certification is that it validates the knowledge, skills and abilities required for a specialty area,” said **Academy of Medical-Surgical Nurses (AMSN) CEO and ABNS Vice President Terri Hinkley EdD, MBA, BScN, RN, CAE**. “Board certification has really helped define the practice of medical-surgical nursing and bring some consistency to how individuals are recognized within med-surg, which is the single largest nursing specialty in the U.S., both inside and outside the hospital.”

Framework for Continued Competency

“Lifelong learning is essential for the individual nurse. But often, the minimum and mandatory CE that the employer or state board of nursing requires is insufficient continuing professional development for nurses to remain current in their specialty,” said **Horahan**.

The recertification process required to maintain a board credential provides that framework. “Because certified nurses continually engage in professional development to maintain their credentials,” added **Hinkley**, “they continue to differentiate themselves from their peers.”

Clearing Up the Certification Confusion

Nurses seeking to become board certified in a specialty typically must:

- Hold an active, unrestricted RN license.
- Pass a rigorous, standardized national exam.
- Have at least 2 years’ experience in the specialty (strongly recommended or required).
- Recertify every 3-5 years by exam or accruing approved, nationally accredited, relevant contact hours.

Specialty board certification programs:

- Represent the state of the specialty across the nation.
- Validate mastery of a defined body of specialty knowledge and demonstrate expertise based on a recognized scope and standards of practice.
- Demonstrate continued competence through recertification.
- Enlist peer subject matter experts to develop exams that reflect current, evidence-based practice.
- May be accredited, most often by ABSNC and/or NCCA.

All Certifications Are Not Equal

Board certification validates that a nurse has already mastered an entire specialty body of knowledge, whereas **technical certifications**, such as ACLS, PALS, and numerous other technical course-based certificates, are driven by often localized instruction to help nurses acquire specific information, skills and competencies.

Board certification is the nursing profession’s highest professional achievement, resulting in a professional credential to be displayed after an individual’s name alongside their academic credentials. **Technical certifications**, while essential in their own right, are often precursors and/or preparatory stepping-stones on the way to board certification. They are important to list on a resume but do not appear after a person’s name.

Advanced certification is the process by which an RN becomes one of the four types of advanced practice nurses (APRNs): Certified Nurse Practitioner (CNP), Certified Registered Nurse Anesthetist (CRNA), Certified Nurse Midwife (CNM), or Clinical Nurse Specialist (CNS). Additionally, APRNs may voluntarily earn the same specialty board credentials available to RNs as well as other board credentials available exclusively to APRNs.

(Passing the respective board exam is the prerequisite for licensure and practice as one of the four types of APRNs, whereas for an RN, passing a specialty board exam is generally voluntary, results in their becoming board certified in that specialty, and occurs after and separate from RN licensure.)

The Benefits of Board Certification

Today, dozens of U.S.-based nursing specialty certification boards offer a growing number of board credentials across every major medical specialty to nurses worldwide. Some are specific to pediatric, adult or geriatric patient populations. While the majority of board credentials focus on specialty or subspecialty practice, some are designed for educators, nurse leaders and other non-practice roles.

Improved Outcomes

Given that certification and nursing excellence are synonymous, it is not surprising that certification is associated with positive nurse, patient and organization outcomes. “The benefits of certification for individual nurses begin as they study for the exam and extend throughout their entire career,” said **ANCC’s Horahan**. “Nurses fill in knowledge gaps as they study the entire body of knowledge for their specialty. Units bond, build teamwork and inspire each other to aim higher when nurses prepare together. The employer benefits by having nurses on staff who are up to date on the latest in their specialty practice.”

Other personal and professional rewards for certified nurses include a high sense of personal accomplishment and satisfaction in their work and earning the respect and recognition of their peers.¹⁰ The ever-growing body of certification research also links certification with greater career success and satisfaction including higher pay, greater opportunity for advancement, and higher employability as well as higher self-efficacy.¹¹ “Certification instills confidence, boosts engagement and ownership, and enhances collaboration and communication, all of which contribute to better, safer care,” said **BCEN’s Schumaker**.

Research on the holy grail of benefits — improved patient outcomes — is of great interest and presents many challenges.¹² Among the certified nursing practice-patient outcome linkages studied to date are infection rates, falls, and medication errors, as well as failure to rescue and mortality rates.¹²⁻¹⁴

“There is research-based evidence that shows that there is a link between certified nursing practice and better patient outcomes and increased patient satisfaction,” said **Diane K. Boyle, PhD, RN, FAAN, professor, Fay W. Whitney School of Nursing, University of Wyoming**, a leading certification researcher. “We also have beginning evidence that the higher the proportion of certified nurses there is on a unit, the better the outcomes. This is a particularly hot area of research at the moment.”

Magnet®-recognized organizations, which aim to achieve or maintain a target of 51% or more certified nurses overall, offer a fertile field for certification research.

More Employers Are Catching On

Organizations that support professional development including certification experience lower turnover, higher retention and attract higher quality job candidates. “While even the relatively modest cost of certification can be a barrier,” explained **Horahan**, “employers are increasingly recognizing the importance of investing in their nurses, and many certifiers are seeing an increase in employers who are paying for nurses to get certified and to maintain certification.”

Board Certification for RNs:¹⁵

- **Advances safety** (fewer adverse incidents and errors in patient care)
- **Improves organizational culture**
- **Improves job satisfaction, empowerment and confidence**
- **Improves processes of care** (facilitates detecting complications and initiating early interventions)
- **Improves quality of care** (improved patient outcomes and higher patient satisfaction rates)
- **Improves recruitment and retention, employability, and job prospects**
- **Is recognized as validation of knowledge in the specialty**
- **Provides a measurable ROI** (quantifiably demonstrates value to health and to health care)
- **Provides professional support** (professional development, collaboration, autonomy)
- **Shapes future practice**

Fast Facts: While 9 in 10 physicians are board certified, a recent Nurse.com survey found only 4 in 10 RNs are, and other studies suggest the RN certification rate may be even lower and varies by specialty.^{16,17}

Case in Point: How the Emergency Specialty Supports RN Certification

Nurse leaders, physicians, professional associations and industry organizations alike support specialty certification for RNs practicing across the emergency spectrum.

Emergency nursing certification dates back to 1980, with the introduction of the Certified Emergency Nurse (CEN®) credential. Today, there are nearly 40,000 CENs, and close to 50,000 emergency, trauma and transport RNs currently hold one or more of the five specialty certifications offered by the Board of Certification for Emergency Nursing (BCEN®).

Nursing Organizations: Through formal position statements and a wide range of professional development and CE offerings, the Emergency Nurses Association (ENA), the Society of Trauma Nurses (STN) and the Air & Surface Transport Nurses Association (ASTNA) support and advocate for emergency nursing specialty certification.¹⁸

Nurse Leaders: In one of the largest value of certification research studies conducted to date, 92% of emergency nurse supervisors said it was important to have Certified Emergency Nurses (CENs) in their organization and rated CENs higher than their non-certified peers on emergency nursing clinical expertise and technical performance, accuracy, safety and ethics.¹⁹

Medical Transport Industry: The Commission on Accreditation of Medical Transport Systems (CAMTS) is a long-time leader in recognizing the importance of board certification and has strongly encouraged nursing certification since 2007. In 2010, CAMTS moved to requiring that transport nurses hold one of several emergency or critical care board certifications within 2 years of hire, with plans to further specify a preference for either the flight (CFRN®) or ground transport (CTRN®) credential.²⁰

“We feel very strongly that if you’re going to work in the transport specialty, you should be well-versed in it,” said **CAMTS Board Member and 24-year flight nurse René Holleran, PhD, FNP-BC, RN-BC, CEN, CFRN, CTRN(Ret), Alumnus CCRN, FAEN.** “Certification demonstrates to the public that you’re educated in what you are doing — flight physiology, aircraft safety, delivering critical care in an ambulance. All nursing members of the transport team, including advanced practice nurses (APRNs), are included in the requirement for transport certification.”

Physician Organizations: In its “Advocating for Certified Emergency Nurses (CENs) in Departments of Emergency Medicine” policy statement, first affirmed in 2006, the American College of Emergency Physicians (ACEP) supports nursing industry efforts “defining standards of emergency nursing care and the provision of resources, support and incentives for emergency nurses to be able to readily attain CEN certification.”²¹ The American Board of Emergency Medicine (ABEM) is also an advocate for certified emergency nursing practice.

ACEP: “ACEP supports CEN certification of RNs working in the ED,” said **ACEP President William P. Jaquis, MD, FACEP.** “Just as ABEM certification for physicians provides some evidence of the individual’s knowledge base and commitment to the specialty, the CEN provides that same thing for nursing.”

ABEM: “Emergency physicians are very proud of their specialty and certification,” said **ABEM President Jill M. Baren, MD, MS, MBA.** “Working alongside certified RNs creates teams of excellence that are steeped in professional accomplishment. Such teams provide the best emergency care possible.”

Physician Practices: The emergency physicians at Edward-Elmhurst Health in Illinois are among their emergency nurse colleagues’ biggest proponents. Since 2006, they have invested over \$100,000 in honoraria to board certified RNs, with nurses receiving \$1,000 for initial certification and \$500 when they recertify.

“It’s a small investment when you look at the improved relationships, improved patient safety and the message of appreciation we’re sending. It is worth every penny when it comes to ensuring nurses have the knowledge to care for our patients,” said **Edward Hospital Emergency Services Chair, SmartER President and American Academy of Emergency Medicine (AAEM) Past President, Tom Scaletta, MD, MAAEM, FACEP, CPXP.** “Edward emergency physicians are board certified, and we believe nurses should be too.”

The End Game: Better & Safer Care, Consistently

The ultimate aim of certification is to protect and benefit the public's health and safety through superior patient care. For organizations committed to delivering quality care, board certified nurses add value at the bedside. For organizations seeking to build centers of nursing excellence, develop in-house expertise and attract the best nurses, supporting board certification gives them an economic and competitive advantage.

"Given that the healthcare system in this country is specialty-dominated, specialty certification of RNs and APRNs makes sense," said **Bonnie Niebuhr, MS, RN, former ABNS and ABSNC CEO (2002-2016) and CEO of the American Board of Perianesthesia Nursing Certification, Inc. (ABPANC)** from 1995-2017.

Board Certification & Nursing Excellence

"Many research studies that have examined the value of certified nursing practice have made one thing crystal clear: Specialty nursing certification equals nursing excellence," said **Niebuhr**.

According to a new Press Ganey Nursing Special Report, *The Far-Reaching Impact of Nursing Excellence*, "Patients' perceptions of their care experience, and by extension their loyalty to the hospital or health system, are largely shaped by nurses. For this reason, organizations that invest in nursing excellence to best leverage the skills, passion and compassion of these professionals are positioned well to succeed in a consumer-driven healthcare market."²²

This same report also found that "health system leaders and others observe that when nurses are highly engaged, empowered and satisfied — key attributes of a culture of nursing excellence — care teams work more cohesively, errors occur less frequently, and patients respond more positively."

"Like board certified physicians, nurses that are board certified offer a high level of quality care to their patients," said **ABMS' Hawkins**. "Based on the board certification credential and what it represents to patients about a physician or nurse, that patient can be confident that those treating them have the skills and knowledge in a particular specialty and are uniquely qualified to provide the best care possible."

"Having all members of a healthcare team certified provides greater confidence that the physician or nurse has met important national standards and continues to improve their knowledge base," said **ABEM's Baren**.

Specialty board certified RNs — and a culture that supports them — are hallmarks of high-performing organizations. By raising the bar through RN board certification, organizations are destined to deliver better and safer care, consistently.



To learn more about board certification for nurses, visit the [American Board of Nursing Specialties](#) or any of the individual specialty certification boards.



For information about emergency, trauma and transport nursing certification, visit the [Board of Certification for Emergency Nursing](#) at [bcen.org](#).



We also invite you to explore **BCEN's certification industry-leading certification support resources**, including our complete [white paper series](#).

Sources & Notes

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- ¹⁵ Drawn from the American Board of Nursing Specialties (ABNS) benefits of board certification list developed during ABNS' 2016 multidisciplinary [National Convening: Building the Business Case for Certification](#).
- ¹⁶ Based on the [FSMB Census of Licensed Physicians in the United States, 2018](#) when compared to American Board of Medical Specialties (ABMS) "active" diplomates reporting in December 2019, the percentage of physicians board certified by an ABMS member board is 90.3%.
- ¹⁷ Mensik, J. (2018). [2018 Nurse.com Nursing Salary Research Report](#), p. 10. Morrisville, NC: Nurse.com.
- ¹⁸ ENA, STN and ASTNA's position statements on nursing certification may be viewed here: [Air & Surface Transport Nurses Association Position Statement: Transport Nurse Certification](#), [ENA Position Statement: Emergency Nursing Certification](#), and [STN Position on Trauma Nursing Specialty Certification](#).
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