

Unification of the NCA and the ASCP Board of Registry

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ABBREVIATIONS: AGT – Association of Genetic Technologists, ASCP – American Society for Clinical Pathology, BOC – Board of Certification, BOR – Board of Registry, NCA – National Credentialing Agency.

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Introduction

Professional credentials are the cornerstone for defining and achieving recognition of an independent scope of practice. When multiple competing credentials exist, that identity is less clear to those outside the profession. The combination of the two largest laboratory certification organizations in 2009 was a landmark event for increasing recognition of laboratory professionals.

During the 1970's, irreconcilable differences erupted between pathologists and technologists regarding the composition and operation of the ASCP Board of Registry, which led to the formation of the National Credentialing Agency. NCA was founded as a free-standing certification organization, based on the principles of peer certification, exam development based on practice analyses and psychometrics, and mandatory re-certification to demonstrate continued competency.

Over time, there were outcries from educators, students, employers, and professionals in the field. The

complexities that resulted from having two competing certifications for NAACLS-accredited programs were making their lives and careers more difficult. They wanted the two organizations to find a way to come together.

After thirty years of fierce competition, both organizations began to recognize that the differences that created the separation, and loomed so large at that time, had all but disappeared. Although there were still pathologists participating on the Board of Registry (BOR), they were clearly minority stakeholders on the board. Both NCA and the BOR had chosen to participate in an accreditation program that ensured best practices, including the requirement of re-certification. Both organizations began to realize that the way to have the greatest impact on our profession was to focus the passion for excellence of our committed volunteers – together – at the same table.

Unification!

On July 21, 2009, a Combination Agreement was signed to merge all of the certification activities and operations of the NCA and the BOR into a single organization, to be known as the ASCP Board of Certification (BOC). The new organization is a modification of the previous BOR structure. Certification activities will operate with complete autonomy from the three sponsoring organizations of the BOC – ASCP, ASCLS, and the Association of Genetic Technologists (AGT). Daily operations will be maintained through ASCP.

The agreement became effective October 23, 2009. At the first meeting of the BOC on October 31-November 1, six former NCA representatives joined the Board of Governors. Four are representing ASCLS, and two representing AGT. ASCP has five laboratory profes-

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sional representatives, and five pathologist representatives. There are eight additional governors representing participating organizations. These include AABB, AACC, American Association of Pathology Assistants, American College of Microbiology, American Society for Cytopathology, American Society for Hematology, CLMA, and National Society for Histotechnology. In addition, there is one public member, for a total of twenty five.

The BOC remains committed to peer credentialing, and to responsiveness to the needs of the profession, adding exams for new specialties and practices levels as healthcare, medicine, and the science warrant. Examination Committees of the BOC now include members from both the relevant NCA and BOR exam committees. It will be their responsibility to hybridize the exam content from both former exams.

Implications

As of October 23, 2009, several changes occurred in credential terminology as comparable active certification designations were reconciled. The ASCP suffix will attach to each certification designation, maintaining that strong brand recognition with employers. The baccalaureate-level certification designations Medical Technologist (MT) and Clinical Laboratory Scientist (CLS) were replaced by Medical Laboratory Scientist, MLS(ASCP)^{CM}. This new terminology is consistent with that used in most of the rest of the world. Associate-level certification designations were converted to Medical Laboratory Technician, MLT(ASCP). The cytogenetics certification designation became Technologist in Cytogenetics, CG(ASCP)^{CM}, and the molecular certification designations became Technologist in Molecular Biology, MB(ASCP)^{CM}. The superscript CM is included after the (ASCP) as (ASCP)^{CM} to designate the continuing certification maintenance by the laboratory professional. At the first BOC meeting, a decision was made to convert active NCA Clinical Laboratory Director and Clinical Laboratory Supervisor designations to Diplomate in Laboratory Management, DLM(ASCP)^{CM}. Anyone holding an active NCA credential, or an ASCP^{CM} credential was automatically converted to the new designations.

Any individuals who were formerly certified by NCA, but allowed their credential to lapse, may re-activate their credential (without taking another examination) by completing the certification maintenance/recertification requirements. This will be important for all still in practice to do, because records at the BOC will only allow credential verification for “active” credentials. Because re-certification was always mandatory for NCA credentials, any lapsed NCA certified individuals will be reported as having no valid credential on record if a request for verification is received by the BOC.

There will be communication to all certificants strongly encouraging all to participate in recertification by continuing education, the hallmark of all recognized professions within and outside of healthcare.

Individuals who were credentialed by the BOR prior to 2004, when certification maintenance became mandatory, are encouraged to convert their credential to the new designation by completing the certification maintenance requirements. For the MT(ASCP) individuals credentialed prior to 2004 who become “active” in their certification maintenance, their credential will be revised to MLS(ASCP)^{CM} and will be shown as that for the three-year certification maintenance period at which time they will be required to update for the next three year cycle.

Because there were differences in the NCA and BOR recertification CEU procedures, both procedures will be accepted through Spring 2010, allowing the Certification Maintenance Committee time to review and reconcile those procedures. This means that NCA certificants who were due to re-certify in February 2010 can submit the CEU's they have been accumulating over the past three years under the NCA procedures.

NCA ceased operations and is dissolving as a corporation, in compliance with their by-laws. On October 31, 2009, ASCLS and AGT officially began sending representatives to the new BOC. All records and examination materials have been transferred to the BOC. Any remaining financial assets, after all expenses

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have been paid, will revert to the two sponsoring organizations.

Our Work Is Not Finished

Not forgetting the lessons from the past, we are now moving forward, together, to adopt best practices and enhance pride and respect for our profession. Our constituents are the winners. When competition becomes the focus, no one wins. Standardizing credential designations and the new descriptive generalist credential will decrease confusion, enhancing our credibility and respect from other healthcare professionals and the public. It will also simplify employers' tasks when setting entry-level standards for job descriptions and recruitment. Students will no longer have to choose between competing exams, or incur the expense and stress of taking two exams. Program Directors can focus their efforts on getting all

of their graduates to become certified. They will also only need one performance report, decreasing cost and complexity for their program. Within the profession, we will now speak from consensus on entry-level standards. There will be additional issues to be resolved, and that will be part of the on-going work of the BOC.

Taking a lesson from nature, birds flying in formation conserve energy, protect and support each other, and combine their strength to advance all in the group toward a common destination. We had been behaving more like a flock of sea gulls than a flock of geese. In the area of professional certification, we will now commence to create a unified formation, and move forward at a faster pace. We truly have reason to celebrate.

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