

Accreditation vs. Licensure vs. Certification

Three distinct systems — one physician career

Accreditation	Licensure	Board Certification
Issued by The Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education (ACGME) and the Liaison Committee on Medical Education (LCME)/American Osteopathic Association (AOA)	Issued by State medical boards (all 50 states, DC, and territories)	Issued by American Board of Medical Specialties (ABMS) member boards (24 specialty boards) and AOA specialty boards
What it means A formal recognition that a residency/fellowship program or institution meets established educational and clinical training standards.	What it means A government-issued legal authorization allowing an individual to practice medicine in a specific jurisdiction.	What it means Voluntary acknowledgement that an individual physician has demonstrated specialty-specific knowledge, training, and competence.
Applies to Residency/fellowship programs and the institutions that sponsor them, not individual physicians	Applies to Individual physicians	Applies to Individual physicians
Issued by/how An independent accrediting body, after peer review by practicing physicians, residents/fellows, and public members, with opportunity for public comment on proposed standards	Issued by/how By the state government after examination (USMLE or COMLEX), training verification, and background check	Issued by/how By a specialty board after completion of accredited education and training, examination, and peer evaluation
When required To offer authorized residency and fellowship training; required for institutions receiving federal GME funding	When required To practice medicine, prescribe medications, or perform procedures — no exceptions	When required Not legally required for practice, but expected for hospital privileges, insurance panels, and many employer contracts
How long it lasts Annually, with a review to render an accreditation decision either to continue, warn or withdraw its accreditation or place it on probation	How long it lasts Periodically (typically every 1-2 years), with continuing education requirements	How long it lasts Ongoing - physicians must meet continuing certification requirements
Example A hospital's internal medicine residency program is ACGME-accredited. The hospital and the	Example A physician licensed in Pennsylvania may not practice in New York without a New York	Example A family physician is board certified in family medicine by the American Board of Family

program are accredited; the residents are not individually accredited.	license, regardless of GME program accreditation status.	Medicine after completing an accredited residency and passing the family medicine certification exam.
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The Critical Distinctions

Accreditation does not license physicians. A program can lose accreditation while its graduates retain their licenses.

Licensure does not certify competence in a specialty. A licensed physician may practice without board certification in some settings.

Certification does not confer a license. Board-certified physicians must still maintain active state licensure.

The ACGME accredits programs, not people. *This distinction is the element most commonly misunderstood in public and policy discourse.*