

Medical Licensure and Credentialing

Role of the Medical School in the Medical Licensure and Credentialing Processes

The license to practice medicine is a privilege granted solely by state medical boards. Each state board sets its own rules and requires specific documentation in compliance with the state's licensure statute and associated regulations. It is each state board's responsibility to assure the public that the practice of medicine will be conducted with reasonable skill and safety. The medical school is one of the sources of important documentation for the state board. The medical school is also responsible for verifying attendance for the credentialing process required by health maintenance organizations (HMOs), private hospitals, and managed care practices.

The United States Medical Licensing Examination (USMLE)

The Federation of State Medical Boards (FSMB) and the National Board of Medical Examiners (NBME) have established a single three-step examination series for medical licensure in the United States. Steps 1 and 2 are commonly taken during medical school. Step 3 is traditionally taken during the first year of residency. The state medical board is responsible for processing Step 3 applications; these forms should not be sent directly to the NBME. Each state board has its own licensure requirement regarding time limits within which a candidate for licensure must successfully complete USMLE Steps 1, 2, and 3.

The USMLE provides a common evaluation system for applicants for medical licensure. Results of USMLE examinations are reported to state medical boards for use in granting the initial license to practice medicine. Each state board has its own guidelines regarding acceptance of USMLE results. Applicants are advised to contact the jurisdiction where they intend to apply for licensure for complete information.

Medical School Documentation Responsibilities

Licensure Forms

There are as many different licensure forms as there are state medical boards. Most boards request certification of the medical degree, which can be supplied directly on the form. Many of the forms include additional questions. Schools can compile, in a binder, copies of licensure forms from each state, which can be filled out correctly

and used as samples. The school's procedures for completing licensure form could also be included in this binder.

Several state medical boards use the same (or very similar) form for application for licensure and to apply for the USMLE Step 3 examination. Medical school officials processing these documents should be careful to note the address on the forms, as the USMLE Step 3 application may need to be sent to a different address than the licensure application.

Medical School Transcript

In addition to certifying an individual's medical education, some state medical boards require an official copy of the candidate's medical school transcript. Schools are not required to submit a copy of a graduate's transcript unless the state medical board requests one. In fact, unless the alumnus/a has submitted a signed release form or letter requesting that a transcript be sent, it is a violation of FERPA for the school to send a transcript with the licensure form.

Certified Copy of Diploma

Several state medical boards request a certified copy of the medical school diploma. The alumnus/a must supply a copy of the diploma to the school for certification, stating that the copy is a true copy of the original. Most state medical boards permit the alumnus/a to submit the certified copy to the board. Schools are advised to examine the diploma closely and to confirm the graduation of the individual by checking the school's academic files.

A statement should be typed directly on the copy that resembles the following:

"This is to certify that this is a true copy of the original diploma for Dr. John Doe who received his Doctor of Medicine degree on May 21, 1998."

The school official's signature (stamp or original), date of certification, and institutional seal should be appended beneath the statement.

Schools may want to remind graduating seniors to make copies of their diplomas prior to laminating and/or framing them, since they may need certified copies from time to time during their careers.

Photograph Certification

Some state medical boards request verification of a graduate's photograph. The licensing authority instructs the school official to superimpose the institutional seal over the photo as confirmation of the applicant's identity. The certifying official should only verify a photograph on a licensure form when the identification is

definite. Schools frequently have yearbooks or composite photos of medical school classes that school officials can use for reference.

When the individual is a recent graduate, the identification process is usually straightforward. However, when the individual graduated from the medical school one or two decades ago, it can be difficult to make a positive identification. School officials should not certify a photograph if there is any doubt that the person in the photograph is the person who actually attended the medical school. A statement can be written on the licensing form explaining that the lapse of time since the student's attendance at the school makes it impossible for the school official to verify the photograph.

Undergraduate Transcript and Certification of Premedical Requirements

It is generally accepted academic policy (and item #12 of the *AAMC Guidelines for Medical Schools Regarding Academic Transcripts*) not to release copies of another school's transcript to a third party or back to the student. If a state medical board requests a transcript from the undergraduate college or another medical school from which the candidate for licensure has transferred, the board or candidate should be referred back to the specific school and instructed to request that an official transcript be sent directly from that institution.

A few forms request confirmation of the completion of premedical requirements.

Requests for Confidential Information

It is important that each school develop, in consultation with its legal counsel, a policy regarding what kinds of information will be disclosed in response to questions requesting confidential information. Each school needs to determine, in advance, the approach it will take, consistently, on this matter. One approach, used by some schools, is to base the response only on factual information contained in the student's transcript and academic file. This policy/procedure may entail the designation of certain school officials to handle the response to specific questions.

Typically, all non-academic student information is kept in a confidential Dean's file and is not part of the student's academic record. Schools should be certain they receive a "Release of Information Form," signed by the alumnus/a, in which the individual specifically states that he/she is giving permission to the school to release any and all information regarding his/her medical education and that he/she understands what is included in this information. If there is any question about the release form or about the nature of what is being reported, the reporting official should check with the school's legal counsel prior to releasing the information.

Some approaches used by some schools in handling these sensitive questions include:

Leaves of absence. When responding in the affirmative, the certifying official may wish to use general categories (such as *medical reasons*, *personal reasons*, *academic research*, *joint degree program*) to provide the requested information without disclosing any confidential information.

Negative evaluations. Some schools report only information that is documented in the student's official educational record. Reporting information when the criticism was sufficiently significant that it was included in the Dean's Letter is another approach.

Probation. Probation is a term defined in various ways by medical schools; it can be academic or disciplinary in nature. Some schools do not have a probationary status. Other schools use probation as an internal monitoring system only. Certifying officials should use caution when responding to a question about probation. If a school does have a probation status, the school's catalog or student handbook should include a clear definition of the term as it is used in that school.

Psychiatric conditions or diagnoses. Responding to a question regarding a student's psychiatric condition may be a violation of the student's privacy even if the school receives a release form signed by the individual. Information about a student's psychiatric condition is part of the student's medical record, not of the student's academic record. The fact that a student has taken a leave of absence for medical reasons, however, may be part of the academic record without reference to the diagnosis.

Disciplinary or Criminal Action. Student records related to a student's disciplinary or criminal charges are frequently kept in confidential files, separate from the academic file. If there is any reference to these charges in the academic file, check with the school's legal counsel prior to providing information in response to any of these sorts of questions.

Retention of Requests and Release Forms

Schools should keep copies of the licensing forms that they complete, as well as of the accompanying release forms. These documents should be retained for a minimum of one year.