The Importance of Credentialing: The Time for Certification Is Here

The Citizen Advocacy Center (CAC; www.cacenter.org), a group devoted to public members and the health professional oversight boards on which they serve, focuses on numerous policy issues, especially continuing competence. This is important to us because this is the avenue of public influence on boards of nursing (and other boards) in terms of what the public is concerned with. In the third quarter issue of News and Views, CAC (2011) reported on a study of importance to nurses. A counterpart to the American Board of Nursing Specialties (ABNS) exists in medicine—the American Board of Medical Specialties (ABMS; www.abms.org). Although we cannot directly transfer findings from medicine to nursing, I was impressed that CAC shared the ABMS survey results related to certification.

The ABMS (2011) conducted an independently enacted consumer survey in late 2010. The 1,000 consumers were asked about physicians’ qualifications, certification, and maintenance of certification. An overwhelming 95% of the respondents said maintaining certification was important, and 66% of these respondents said it was very important. When I asked myself the parallel about nurses, I could not envision a dramatic difference in results. In the past few years, the profession, with the help of others, has made significant strides in helping the public understand the distinctive and dramatic roles nurses play in society. Why would the public expect less of us than of physicians?

Although 60% of the respondents thought physicians should be retested at regular intervals, even more significant was that 90% of the respondents said all of the aspects of the maintenance of competence program were important. Again, perhaps the public simply believes that we (nurses) all have some form of competence measurement that is validated on a regular basis. Alas, that is not the case.

As some employment settings have moved to reporting what percentage of the staff are certified, several questions arise. If this is important, why are not all? How long after initial licensure should one wait to seek certification in some area of practice, even if it is general practice? How many leaders hold a certification? If the leaders are influential, does holding a certification or not suggest the view new staff will take about certification? Should having a high percentage of certified nurses affect the way in which health care reimbursement will be made?

One other thing: the second most important factor for selecting one physician over another was board certification (91%). What is the importance of a high percentage of certified nursing staff to patients selecting a hospital?

The Institute of Medicine’s (2010) report, The Future of Nursing, calls for us to take advantage of every opportunity we have. This is not to advance nursing, but rather to improve health. If certification is important to the public, we should be alert to the expectations we need to meet and consider what we can learn from another discipline.

REFERENCES

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