ABPN Launches ‘Pilot’ Alternative to Ten-Year MOC Examination

By Christopher R. Thomas, MD, ABPN Psychiatry Director

The ABPN administered its first recertification examination in 2000 in the subspecialty of geriatric psychiatry, and it was an open book, take home exam. Subsequently, the American Board of Medical Specialties (ABMS) specified that all Maintenance of Certification (MOC) Part III examinations be administered under proctored, closed book test conditions. As the Boards gained more experience, other options such as modular MOC examinations and multiple examinations during an MOC cycle were proposed, and in 2015 the ABMS revised the MOC standards to encourage Member Boards to explore new methods of evaluating diplomate knowledge. While the ABPN had been continuously reviewing its MOC program, a more intensive consideration of its MOC Part III requirement was undertaken. The purpose of this article is to outline the deliberations that began in 2016 and led to the launch in January 2019 of a Pilot Project for a new format consisting of short, on-line tests based on journal articles.

In Spring 2016, the ABPN held a Crucial Issues Forum on MOC with attendees from major stakeholder organizations, including the American Psychiatric Association (APA) and the American Academy of Neurology (AAN) as well as other professional societies, during which alternatives to the MOC Part III examinations were discussed. Representatives of the American Board of Medical Specialties (ABMS), Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC), Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education (ACGME), and Accreditation Council for Continuing Medical Education (ACCME) provided the perspectives of their organizations, and representatives of the American Boards of Emergency Medicine, Internal Medicine, and Obstetrics and Gynecology reviewed their plans for MOC Part III. Options were discussed in small groups, and the feedback was recorded for future consideration. The ABPN also appointed an MOC Clinical Advisory Committee with members who were in practice to provide additional perspectives on recertification.

After careful deliberation the ABPN Directors concluded that a format that would best serve the ABPN’s diplomates should have the following characteristics:

- Contribute to lifelong learning
- Be relevant to clinical practice
- Allow for some tailoring based on professional interests
- Be available more frequently than current ten-year examinations
- Take place in the least restrictive testing environment possible
- Yield informative feedback

Hence, in July 2017, the ABPN Directors approved a Pilot Project that consisted of short, online, open book examinations based on journal articles for Part III MOC in psychiatry, neurology, child neurology, and child and adolescent psychiatry. In Fall 2017, the Pilot Project was approved by the ABMS Committee on Continuing Certification. The following parameters were established for the three-year Pilot Project:

- To assure that a broad range of topics are covered, content outlines were developed based on the current MOC examination outlines. As shown in Table 1, each has 10 categories, with the goal of identifying 4 articles per category for a total of 40 articles.
- All selected articles must have direct clinical application and usually have been published in the past five years in peer-reviewed journals listed on Medline. Practice guidelines and other important clinical references are also acceptable.
- Five multiple-choice questions were developed for each article and include at least one question about a specific and meaningful detail, one conclusion question that can only be answered by reading the entire article, and at least two questions focused on the clinical application of information contained in the article.
- To get credit for an article, the diplomate must answer at least four of the five items correctly on first attempt.
- To pass the Pilot Project, diplomates must earn credit for 30 articles.

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MOC Pilot Test Committees were established for each examination with 11 members each. The ABPN nominated five members for each committee and selected the remaining six from nominations made by the related professional organization (i.e., APA, AAN, the Child Neurology Society, and the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry). The committees began work selecting articles in Spring 2018 and wrote and edited questions over the summer. Two committee members selected articles for each outline category, with final article selection based on review and approval by the whole committee.

In Fall 2018, the test administration platform was selected, and alpha testing of the online examinations was carried out by MOC Pilot Test Committee members and the ABPN Directors. The paramount concerns were ease of using the interface, speed and interpretability of test results, and data security. Each test included feedback surveys on the article, the test questions, the test delivery platform, and the Pilot Project as a whole. The Pilot Project staff and committee chairs monitored responses and comments on test questions in the same fashion as for other ABPN examinations, and items were rescored and revised if appropriate.

Announcements on the ABPN website, newsletters, and emails informed eligible diplomates (those due for recertification in 2019-2021) about the MOC Pilot Project. There is no extra cost for diplomate participation, and there is no penalty if a diplomate chooses to drop out or fails to complete the examinations, although they will have to take a proctored recertification examination. Thus far, the response has been enthusiastic, with 64% of the eligible diplomates (~16,000) agreeing to participate. Of those, about 4,600 have already completed one or more of the examinations, and comments have been very positive. For example, a diplomate wrote, “To be honest, I expected to prefer this slightly more than the exam, but I didn’t expect to be this enthusiastic. I thought the articles were well chosen and I have already applied some of what I learned to my practice. I was happy to have a bunch of pertinent articles curated for me and I thought that the majority were extremely interesting.”

The Pilot Project will run from 2019-2021, and the overall success will be measured by:

- Proportion of eligible diplomates that volunteer to participate
- Proportion of diplomates that complete the pilot
- The success rate of diplomates
- Overall satisfaction of diplomates on the exit surveys
- Relevance and quality of the selected journal articles as indicated by the examination surveys
- Total test scores for each article and performance variation across articles
- Quality of the test questions as assessed by item statistics, number of corrected items, and examination surveys
- Test delivery problems and user satisfaction with the delivery platform
- Feedback from professional societies

At the end of the Pilot Project, the ABPN will analyze these data and, if appropriate, request that the ABMS approve the new format as a permanent replacement for the current MOC Part III examinations.

The goal of MOC requirements is to document the continued growth and performance of certified clinicians. The ABPN Pilot Project guides the continued learning with at-home examinations on peer-selected articles on important clinical issues. This format fits more easily into busy schedules than traditional tests, and when important issues arise for clinicians, such as the opioid crisis, they can be addressed more quickly than in the current ten-year examination cycle. The Pilot Project exemplifies the ABPN commitment to serving the professions of psychiatry and neurology by promoting excellence in practice.
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<td>Developmental Processes Through the Life Cycle</td>
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