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American Academy of Neurology

American Neurological Association

Association of University Professors of Neurology

Child Neurology Society

Professors of Child Neurology

**Identifying qualified physicians** to join an organization is paramount to providing quality patient care. You want the best possible talent pool to select from when making hiring decisions. Board certification, though entirely voluntary, is a valuable designation in the medical community and can help institutions identify the most highly trained and experienced candidates in primary and subspecialty areas of medicine.

The **United Council for Neurologic Subspecialties (UCNS)** was established in 2003 to assure that as neurologic subspecialties emerge, they develop with quality standards and oversight for training through an accreditation process and that physician subspecialty expertise is measured through a credible credentialing body.

While a seemingly straightforward approach may be to establish a guideline that excludes recognition of any certifying board that is not a member of the American Board of Medical Specialties (ABMS), it is not necessarily a fair or appropriate standard in every circumstance, especially for smaller emerging subspecialties. We share concerns regarding poorly organized entities that claim to certify physician specialists but apply inadequate standards for applicants and/or administer examinations that fail to adequately measure a candidate's competence in a medical specialty field. We also understand the challenge of adopting credentialing policies that determine which medical specialty boards will be recognized as legitimate.

When it comes to identifying and hiring board-certified physicians, we urge department chairs, chief medical officers, and credentialing committees to recognize the UCNS as a legitimate certifying body in your credentialing policies, hiring practices, and where certification identification is acknowledged. The following information provides the background information to support your consideration and the credibility of UCNS certification.

Paul G. Fisher, MD  
Chair, Board of Directors

Brenda L. Riggott  
Executive Director

## ABOUT THE UCNS

### Mission

The mission of UCNS is to improve patient care by accrediting neurologic subspecialty fellowship training programs and certifying physicians regarding their competence in these subspecialties by administering examinations.

### History

The United Council for Neurologic Subspecialties (UCNS) was established in 2003 by five of the leading national associations in neurology (parent organizations): 1) American Academy of Neurology (AAN), 2) American Neurological Association, 3) Association of University Professors of Neurology, 4) Child Neurology Society, and 5) Professors of Child Neurology. UCNS was established as an independent **501(c)(6) nonprofit organization** in 2003.

The UCNS **Board of Directors** is comprised of representatives of the five parent organizations, each of the recognized subspecialties, and appointed liaisons from the Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education (ACGME) and the American Board of Psychiatry & Neurology (ABPN), providing for diverse and peer-reviewed oversight of the organization.

The ABPN, one of the 24 ABMS member boards, certifies physicians in the primary specialties of psychiatry, neurology, and some large neurologic subspecialties. However, in recent years, advances in neuroscience have occurred at an explosive rate, giving birth to innovative technologies and treatments promising dramatic improvements in neurologic care. As a result, new subspecialties in neurology have developed without comprehensive standards for training and practice. With over 80%<sup>1</sup> of neurology residents proceeding to subspecialty fellowships following graduation from their residencies, the five parent organizations identified a need to assure that emerging neurologic subspecialties develop according to appropriate standards and have a body of oversight to assure these standards are met. The UCNS was established to meet these needs.

*Bylaws, Code of Ethics, and Controls:* The UCNS operates per the **written bylaws** and a **code of ethics** that guide the organization and its internal review and control process. The UCNS also subscribes to the code of ethics established by the parent organizations. Many of these policies were developed to mirror policies of the ACGME and ABMS member boards. Pursuant to the UCNS Bylaws, liaisons from the ABPN and ACGME Neurology Residency Review Committee (RRC) attend UCNS Board meetings. All members of the UCNS Board of Directors, Councils, and committees serve on a volunteer basis.

In short, UCNS performs the same functions as those performed by the ACGME and ABMS member boards. We believe that we do so with equivalent rigor and integrity.

### Statistical Profile

As of January 2021, the UCNS recognizes nine neurologic subspecialties (with year of recognition granted): Autonomic Disorders (2007), Behavioral Neurology & Neuropsychiatry (2004), Clinical Neuromuscular Pathology (2005), Headache Medicine (2005), Geriatric Neurology (2007), Neuroimaging (2005), Neurocritical Care (2005), Neuro-oncology (2005), and Interventional Neurology (2020). The number of training programs and physicians who have met the quality and core competency standards set by the UCNS have grown to include:

- Over **3,300 UCNS-certified diplomates** who practice in 49 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and four Canadian provinces.
- **210 UCNS-accredited fellowship programs** in 35 states and one Canadian province.
- UCNS-accredited fellowship programs are found at leading academic medical centers including Massachusetts General Hospital, Brigham and Women's Hospital, Johns Hopkins, Mayo Clinic, Duke, Stanford, Yale, Cleveland Clinic, UCLA, Northwestern, Baylor, Memorial Sloan-Kettering, and many others.

## Certification Overview

Protecting the public from illegitimate certification boards is important and a shared concern of the UCNS. It is with the public in mind that the UCNS has created legitimate certification and accreditation processes. Our goal is to establish the standards and measure of core competencies for physicians who treat patients in these subspecialty areas and enhance the quality of physician training in emerging neurologic subspecialties.

The UCNS **certification eligibility criteria and examination process** is closely aligned with the ABPN. Examinations are conducted under proctored supervision. Psychometricians are involved before, during, and after each subspecialty examination to ensure administration of quality examinations and psychometrically valid results. Development of examinations is overseen by a **Certification Council**, comprised of respected experts nominated by the parent organizations, that reports to the UCNS Board.

*Independent Certifying and Accrediting Body:* The UCNS is an independent certifying and accrediting body for emerging neurologic subspecialties. To be approved as a subspecialty by UCNS, one or more sponsoring organization(s) must submit a **formal application** that demonstrates the subspecialty is a discrete and credible area of practice in neurology. The application must include a proposed comprehensive core curriculum and training program requirements that will apply to all accredited programs, and a general examination content outline that is deemed the core competencies of certified physicians in the subspecialty area. Subspecialty applications are reviewed and ultimately approved or declined by the UCNS Board of Directors.

*Certification Core Requirements:* To meet the UCNS certification examination eligibility requirements, an applicant must be certified in their primary specialty by an ABMS member board, the American Osteopathic Association (AOA), or the Royal College of Physicians & Surgeons of Canada (RCPSC). Like ABMS member boards such as ABPN, UCNS offers examinations with a “Practice Track” pathway until the number of UCNS-accredited programs and graduating fellows has grown to a level that supports closure of that pathway. Upon closure of the Practice Track only graduates and faculty of UCNS-accredited fellowships are eligible to apply for certification.

*Certification Examinations:* UCNS certification examinations are developed by committees of ten distinguished experts in their subspecialty field who are appointed by the respective subspecialty sponsoring organizations. The committees are assisted by independent psychometric consultants who provide state-of-the-art training and item analysis that occurs both before and after the examination. Examinations are proctored and contain 200 computer-based multiple-choice questions and participants are allowed up to four or five hours for completion depending on the subspecialty.

*Continuous Certification – a commitment to lifelong learning:* Certifications issued by UCNS are continuous contingent on diplomates meeting the **continuous-certification requirements** that assures physicians are always up-to-date on the most recent developments in their subspecialty through lifelong learning and annual self-assessment.

## Certification Recognition

UCNS certification is a means for healthcare organizations and patients to identify physicians who meet specific criteria signifying their expert subspecialty knowledge. Demonstrating the credibility of UCNS certification and recognition, the UCNS has been successful in appeals to state boards of medicine, including Florida and Oklahoma, that otherwise restrict advertising board certification to ABMS-related certifications. The Leapfrog Group recognizes the UCNS certification for Neurocritical Care which follows the same rigorous certification process as all other UCNS-recognized subspecialty certifications. There are also three UCNS-subspecialties that have been granted taxonomy codes by the National Uniform Claim Committee including Neurocritical Care, Neuroimaging, and Behavioral Neurology & Neuropsychiatry.

## UCNS-Accredited Fellow Training Programs

*A measure of training excellence*

The UCNS is also a programmatic accreditor that **accredits training programs** in the UCNS-recognized neurologic subspecialty areas. The fellowship programs must have an ACGME-accredited sponsoring institution that assumes ultimate responsibility for overseeing administration of the training program. Accreditation of each fellowship program is managed by an **Accreditation Council** that reports to the UCNS Board. The nine-member Accreditation Council is comprised of medical educators, program directors, and department chairs who are nominated to serve by the five UCNS parent organizations.

To enroll as a fellow in a UCNS-accredited fellowship program, an applicant must have graduated from a residency accredited by ACGME or RCPSC. Fellows who complete fellowship training at **UCNS-accredited programs** have received the training deemed necessary by the subspecialty experts in the field at a credible program that has the oversight to assure the educational quality standards are met.

## For More Information

*Certification Verification:* Confirm UCNS-certification status on the UCNS website at [www.ucns.org](http://www.ucns.org).

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## REFERENCES

1. American Academy of Neurology, AAN Resident Survey: Final Report January 23, 2008, St. Paul: AAN; 2008.