

Human resources

Certification: What is the value?

Contributed by Competency & Credentialing Institute.

The operating room is an increasingly specialized and complex practice area. Technology advances rapidly, and consumers of perioperative care demand safe, quality treatment.

"Surgical intervention requires a well-honed team of experts that trust each other, from the physicians to nurses and surgical techs," Larry Asplin, RN, MS, CNOR, RT(R), president of the Competency & Credentialing Institute (CCI), the organization that administers the CNOR certification program for perioperative nurses, said.

"In my experience, certified nurses are knowledgeable on a broader range of topics, which leads to more credibility with their team members."

Environment requires more

State licensure has historically been used to demonstrate that nurses have the necessary knowledge to perform their jobs. Today, the environment requires more. The value of voluntary certification, in this case the CNOR credential, has grown to meet this demand. While licensure and registration for nurses demonstrates minimal competence, specialty certification denotes a more advanced level of knowledge and practice in a specialty area.

Studying enhances critical thinking skills.

Since the CNOR program was launched in 1979, nearly 33,000 nurses have voluntarily earned the credential. In the past 3 years, the total number of certificants has increased nearly 10%.

Perioperative nursing is not the only certification program that has experienced growth, according to the American Board of Nursing Specialties (ABNS), the membership association for the industry. The ABNS membership represents more than 500,000 certified nurses.

Research has not conclusively linked CNOR certification or other specialty certifications to better patient outcomes. Many believe, however, that the recruitment and retention of perioperative nurses, who exemplify the qualities associated with certification, including expert knowledge, clinical judgment, and professionalism, positively influence patient safety and satisfaction.

Certification and empowerment

Nursing retention is a key strategy for addressing the workforce

shortage. Organizations that certify nurses are beginning to investigate how certification may affect feelings of empowerment in the workplace and nurses' intent to leave their positions or the profession.

A 2010 article in the *American Journal of Critical Care* summarizes the efforts of the American Association of Critical-Care Nurses (AACN) and the AACN Certification Corporation to determine if and how certification affects empowerment.

AACN's research study was built on a larger organizational theory that argues that employees who have access to empowerment structures (more autonomy, opportunities for growth and learning, etc) are more effective at work.

The results showed significant differences in total empowerment scores between AACN-certified nurses and noncertified nurses. Further, nurses who held AACN certification and another national certification, such as the CNOR, had the highest empowerment scores.

Though limited in scope, the study adds to the literature on the concept of certification and empowerment and poses a question to managers and employers: If certification may enhance feelings of empowerment, and if a nurse values certification, how can the institution do more to support it?

What perioperative nurses value

Understanding what periopera-

Human resources

tive nurses value is one way for surgical departments and hospitals to ensure they are hiring and retaining nurses with these skills and fulfilling their responsibility to their patients.

"I have found with my staff that the rigorous undertaking of studying for the CNOR exam enhances their critical thinking skills," said Asplin, who works at St Cloud Hospital in St Cloud, Minnesota.

In 2003, CCI conducted a large-scale research project to answer the question of what a perioperative nurse values. Responses by participants revealed that certified perioperative nurses perceived the value of their certification to be in 3 areas: personal values, recognition by others, and professional practice.

Nurses who earned the CNOR credential felt a strong sense of personal accomplishment and satisfaction and expressed confidence in their clinical abilities. The respondents also agreed strongly with statements that indicated certification:

- validates specialized knowledge
- indicates professional growth
- indicates attainment of a practice standard
- provides evidence of professional commitment
- provides professional challenge
- enhances professional credibility.

The research CCI conducted using the proprietary Perceived Value of Certification Tool has been replicated across different nursing specialties and by ABNS with similar results.

"Nursing is a profession; it's not just a job," Jay Bowers, RN, BSN, CNOR, a clinical educator and CNOR-certified nurse responsible for 18 operating rooms at West Virginia University Hospital, said. "As a certified nurse, I am required to continue my education, and that

bettens not only me but also my patients and peers."

CNOR credential

The CNOR credential is awarded for a 5-year period, during which candidates must participate in activities to enhance their knowledge and ensure they stay current with their practice.

Recertification is an essential element of the credentialing process. If certification provides some assurance to employers and the public of the certified nurse's achievements, it is reasonable to provide that assurance at more than one time in an individual's career.

The research that CCI and other certifying bodies conducted allowed the industry to start to quantify what value certification carries for fellow nurses, patients, and employers. The study showed that intrinsic factors (accomplishment, accountability, professional challenge) are strong motivators for earning the CNOR, but extrinsic forces also play into the equation.

"The leadership at my hospital very much understands how important certification is and supports it as part of our overall professional development," Jim Stobinski, RN, MSN, CNOR, director of surgical services at St Luke's Regional Medical Center in Boise, Idaho, said. "We address certification in all of our job descriptions and, all other factors being equal, prefer to hire certified nurses."

Hospitals and certification

CCI conducted a survey of certificants attending the 2010 AORN Congress to gather information on how hospitals supported certification (sidebar).

Stobinski's own job performance evaluation includes metrics related to his staff's performance on the CNOR exam. Certification, he re-

How hospitals support CNOR certification

- 40% provide increased compensation
- 58% reimburse for exam fees
- 40% reimburse for recertification fees
- 49% reimburse for continuing education activities.

Source: CCI survey at 2010 AORN Congress with 700 respondents.

ports, also played an important role in St Luke's achievement of Magnet Status from the American Nurses Credentialing Center (ANCC).

ANCC's Magnet Recognition Program recognizes health care organizations where nursing excellence is prevalent. Professional certification contributes to the ability of a hospital to earn Magnet Status. Organizations must supply evidence that they support professional development and certification.

Encouraging candidates

Brenda Edwin, RN, BSN, a 35-year veteran of the OR and surgical services educator at Houston Northwest Medical Center in Houston, Texas, is spearheading her department's efforts to ensure that the 40 eligible perioperative nurses successfully pass the CNOR exam. The hospital's desire for Magnet Status was a catalyst for the effort, but Edwin says certification also contributes to the high quality of care her team provides.

"The bottom line is that CNOR certification will make me the best practitioner in the OR that I can be, and I will be a better advocate for my patients' safety because of it," she said. "Earning this certification is a personal accomplishment that shows nurses that they know and

Human resources

understand the latest in caring for their patients.”

One factor limiting access to certification is cost. The exam fee is \$295 for AORN members and \$375 for nonmembers. Employers can help eliminate this barrier by providing reimbursement for exam fees.

“Our managers went to bat for the nurses who wanted the CNOR by covering the initial exam fee,” Edwin said.

More importantly, managers and employers can create a culture in their surgical departments that

promotes certification as an element to improving patient safety.

“Certification is a pathway to help nurses fulfill their desire for professional achievement and growth and embrace their position not just as a job, but as a career,” Asplin said. “We demand a board-certified surgeon. Why wouldn’t we demand our nurses be board certified also?” ❖

—*Cynthia Allen, MA*
Communications Consultant
Competency & Credentialing
Institute

References

Fitzpatrick JJ, Campo TM, Graham G, et al. Certification, empowerment, and intent to leave current position and the profession among critical care nurses. *Am J Crit Care.* 2010;19: 218-226.

Gaberson, K. Perceived value of certification by certified perioperative nurses. *Nurs Outlook.* 2003;51(6):272-6.

OR Manager Reprint

Copyright © 2010
OR Manager, Inc. P O Box 5303
Santa Fe, NM 87502-5303
Telephone: 800/442-9918
Fax: 505/983-0790
info@ormanager.com