

## Chapter 10

# MAINTAINING CERTIFICATION AND THE CONTINUING MEDICAL EDUCATION CATEGORIES

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### Introduction

Every Army physician assistant (PA) must maintain both military PA requirements and civilian-equivalent requirements for certification to practice. This certification is the reason for the “C” on PA credentials (PA-C). In the military, certification is vitally important to obtaining military treatment facility credentials, receive bonuses, and ensure educational proficiency as PAs.

### Maintaining Certification

Maintaining the “C” (certification) in “PA-C” is required in accordance with Army Regulation 40-68, *Clinical Quality Management*,<sup>1</sup> and Health Affairs Policy 04-002, *Waivers of Licensure Requirement for Qualified Military Physician Assistants*.<sup>2</sup> According to the National Committee on Certification of Physician Assistants (NCCPA), maintenance of the 10-year certification includes five 2-year cycles. The PA must log 100 continuing medical education (CME) credits online during each cycle. The CME logging window begins May 1 in the PA’s certification issuance year and continues through December 31 of the certification expiration year.<sup>3</sup>

At the end of the 10-year cycle, PAs are required to take the Physician Assistant National Recertifying Exam (PANRE). They must also submit a certification fee by December 31 of their certification expiration year.<sup>3</sup>

## Continuing Medical Education

CME “consists of clinical and professional education activities that maintain, develop or increase the knowledge, skills, and professional performance and relationships that a PA uses to provide services for patients, the public and the profession.”<sup>4</sup> After PAs pass the Physician Assistant National Certifying Exam (PANCE), they maintain certification by completing the required number of credits from two categories of CME options.

### ***Category 1 Continuing Medical Education***

There are four types of category 1 CME: (1) regular, (2) certification programs, (3) process improvement [PI-CME], and (4) self-assessment.<sup>5</sup> Fifty credits in each 2-year cycle are required to be from category 1 CME. Category 1 CME includes certification and recertification courses preapproved and classified by the American Academy of Physician Assistants (AAPA), such as seminars, journal post-tests, conferences, and online resources. The following sponsors offer Category 1 CME<sup>5</sup>:

- AAPA
- American Medical Association, with providers accredited by the Accreditation Council for Continuing Medical Education
- American Academy of Family Physicians
- American Osteopathic Association
- Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada
- College of Family Physicians of Canada
- Physician Assistant Certification Council of Canada

**Regular Continuing Medical Education.** Programs or certificate-producing courses preapproved by one of the previously mentioned sponsors comprise regular CME. An example is the AAPA annual conference.

**Certificate Program Continuing Medical Education.** Certificate programs are preapproved by the AAPA for category 1 CME regardless of the program or location. Examples are Basic Life Support and Advanced Trauma Life Support courses.<sup>6</sup>

**Performance Improvement Continuing Medical Education.** PI-CME activities compare the PA's clinical practice to clinical practice guidelines and other established metrics. PAs apply what they have learned in these activities to improve their practice. PI-CME is conducted alone or in partnership with a physician or others in the practice. Each clinician working on these CME projects can receive credit for PI-CME. Each PI-CME activity follows a three-stage model<sup>7</sup>:

**Stage I—performance measurement.** Compare your practice to an established evidence-based metric or standard.

**Stage II—intervention and improvement plan.** Develop and implement a plan to improve your practice based on the standards.

**Stage III—remeasurement.** Evaluate the impact of the improvement plan on your practice. For example, a PA chooses a PI-CME activity focused on asthma. For stage I, the PA records key data such as disease duration, exacerbations, levels of control, current medication, and other information for current asthma patients. The PA then measures their current practice against the current standard of medical care. In this case, the PA compares patient data to the National Asthma Education and Prevention Program's *Expert Panel Report 3: Guidelines for the Diagnosis and Management of Asthma*,<sup>8</sup> using a tool that quantifies asthma severity and treatment response.<sup>9</sup> In stage II, the PA corrects the existing clinical practice, based on the current standard of care. Stage III allows the PA to evaluate the improvements based on the adjustments. This final step completes the PI-CME activity, and the PA receives category I CME credit for the module.

**Self-Assessment Continuing Medical Education.** Self-assessment activities provide a systematic way to review each PA's performance, knowledge base, and skill set. In these CME activities, students typically choose a topic, take a pretest, review current evidence-based material, and take a written or multiple-choice test to assess learning.<sup>5</sup>

In this example, a PA chooses exercise-induced asthma (EIA) as a self-assessment CME subject. The module begins with a quiz on the PA's current understanding of the disease process and treatment. Second, the PA receives evidence-based medical information about EIA.

After reading the information, the PA must pass a multiple-choice test. This final step completes the self-assessment CME activity and the PA receives a category 1 CME credit for the module.

As with all category 1 CME, PI-CME and self-assessment CME activities must be preapproved by AAPA to meet requirements. Since August 2016, NCCPA awards 50% additional credit for SA-CME and PI-CME.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, an SI-CME course worth 10 credits is converted to 15 credits. Additionally, the first 20 PI-CME credits logged during each cycle are doubled.<sup>10</sup>

## ***Category 2 Continuing Medical Education***

Category 2 CME consists of any medical-related activity that enhances the role of the PA.<sup>5</sup> This type of CME includes activities such as journal reading, studying for the PANRE, medical writing, and attending medical lectures.<sup>4</sup> Quantification for credit is based on an honor system of how many hours the PA spends. For example, if the PA spent an hour studying for the PANRE, they would log 1 credit hour for category 2 CME.

### ***Logging Credit***

In addition to earning CME credit, it is important to log credits earned through the NCCPA website.<sup>3</sup> For national certification maintenance, the PA must provide the following information<sup>3,11</sup>:

- program title,
- provider (the organization that administered the program),
- number of CME credits earned, and
- sponsor (the organization that designated CME credit to the program).

## **Certification**

### ***New Certification Holders***

When PA students graduate, their first CME cycle may vary depending on the time of year they graduate and when they successfully pass the PANRE.<sup>12</sup> For example, a PA student may graduate on January 24, 2020; take the PANRE 8 days later; and receive the PANRE score February 15, 2 weeks after the examination. This PA's CME earning cycle will begin on February 15, 2020, and last through December 31, 2022.

### ***Ten-Year Certification Cycle***

Before 2014, the PA certification cycle was 6 years. Now, PAs who pass the PANCE or PANRE enter a 10-year certification period. This cycle consists of five 2-year certification maintenance cycles. Table 10-1 shows an example of the 10-year certification cycle.

### ***Lost Certification***

If a PA fails to log the appropriate 100 hours of CME and pay the maintenance fee by the due date at the end of the 2-year maintenance period, they must take PANCE or PANRE to regain certification.<sup>13</sup>

### ***Administrative Certification Extension***

If a PA does not earn or log all requirements by 2359 hours (Pacific Time) on December 31 of their certification expiration year, they are granted a 1-month administrative certificate extension to complete requirements.<sup>3</sup> If requirements are not met by January 31, current NCCPA policies

**Table 10-1. Example of the 10-year certification cycle.**

<b>CME Cycle Window</b>	<b>SA-CME (Cat 1)</b>	<b>PI-CME (Cat 1)</b>	<b>Regular Cat 1 CME</b>	<b>Cat 2 CME</b>	<b>Total CME</b>
1 May 2020– 31 Dec 2022	20	0	30	50	100
1 May 2022– 31 Dec 2024	0	20	50	30	100
1 May 2024– 31 Dec 2026	5	15	80	0	100
1 May 2026– 31 Dec 2028	15	5	30	50	100
<i>Total Goal: 40 of each SA/PI in first 4 cycles</i>	<i>40</i>	<i>40</i>			
1 May 2028– 31 Dec 2030	0	0	100	0	100

Cat: category; CME: continuing medical education; PI-CME: performance improvement CME; SA-CME: self-assessment CME

determine options and procedures for regaining certification. Appeals for an additional extension are allowed only for extraordinary extenuating circumstance with appropriate documentation.<sup>3</sup>

### ***Lost Certification Due to Disciplinary Proceedings***

Under current NCCPA policies, PAs who have lost certification may regain it by completing CME requirements and passing the PANRE. However, PAs who have lost eligibility for certification based on NCCPA disciplinary proceedings must first apply to reestablish eligibility.<sup>3</sup>

## **Audits**

PAs must keep their category 1 CME documentation for the current and previous CME cycles. For example, if a PA is currently on a 2020–2022 cycle, they should keep that documentation and the 2018–2020 CME cycle documentation.

For quality control purposes, the NCCPA randomly conducts audits of category 1 CME after the completion of the previous year's cycle. PAs selected to participate in the audits have 6 weeks from receipt of the written notification to provide NCCPA with completion certificates for all category 1 CME performed during the audit timeframe. If an audited PA cannot provide this documentation, they retain certification but will be re-audited the following certification period and must pay a re-audit fee of \$100. The PA must also complete any additional unsubstantiated category 1 CME from the previous audit timeframe. These PAs may face additional random audits over the next three certification maintenance cycles. Failure to comply adequately within 6 weeks of notification in these additional audits results in immediate loss of certification. NCCPA does not audit category 2 CME.<sup>14</sup>

## **Summary**

Understanding the PA certification process, including CME requirements, is vital to avoid losing certification. Obtaining and logging CME is a regulatory requirement for maintaining certification. It is the PA's responsibility to maintain certification as a matter of principle and accountability.

## References

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