

# **Sports Certified Specialist**

## **Why Certify**

### **History**

The American Physical Therapy Association (APTA), a national professional organization representing more than 75,000 members throughout the United States, established the specialist certification program in 1978. Specialization is the process by which a physical therapist builds on a broad base of professional education and practice to develop a greater depth of knowledge and skills related to a particular area of practice. The specialist certification program has been designed to identify and define physical therapy specialty areas and to formally recognize physical therapists who have attained advanced knowledge and skills in those areas. Certification also assists the public and health care community in identifying therapists with acknowledged expertise in a particular field of practice and demonstrates that physical therapists are devoted to addressing the unique needs of the people with whom we work.

Certification is achieved through successful completion of a standardized application and examination process. Coordination of this program is provided by the American Board of Physical Therapy Specialties (ABPTS), the governing body for approval of new specialty areas and certification of clinical specialists. Specialty councils representing the seven recognized specialty areas have been appointed to delineate and describe the advanced knowledge, skills, and abilities of clinical specialists; to determine specific requirements for certification, and to develop the certification examinations.

### **Impact of Specialist Certification**

Certified specialists report that board certification has impacted both their personal and professional lives. Clinical specialists who were certified in 1995/1996 were recently surveyed to determine the impact of specialist certification on professional practice. The survey respondents reported spending an increased amount of time in research, teaching, consultation, scholarly productivity, and professional activities after specialist certification. These individuals report that specialist certification had a positive effect on consultations (52%) invited presentations (44%), new job opportunities (43%), and the opportunity for increased responsibility (43%). Three-fourths of those surveyed indicated that specialist certification positively affected patient care. These certified specialists also report an increase in prestige in a clinical setting (83%), an academic setting (68%), a professional association (67%), and a community setting (44%). Personal rewards associated with specialist certification included an increase in self confidence (86%), sense of personal achievement (96%), and a more interesting and fulfilling career (72%). Complete survey data are available from APTA's Specialist Certification Department.

The first step in preparing for the SCS exam is to carefully review a document called the Description of Specialty Practice (DSP). This document is available from the APTA Specialization Certification Department. The DSP defines the competencies and provides the candidate with the content blue print of the exam. After reviewing this document the candidate should carefully self-assess their strengths and weakness related to the

described competencies. Based on their self-assessment and clinical experiences the candidate can then develop a study plan that will in particular address their weaknesses. Some common methods utilized in these plans include: course work (CE and/or post-entry level), targeted reading/studying of current literature, utilization of mentors, additional targeted clinical experiences in sports physical therapy, and forming study groups.

With regard to a reference list, the reality of sports physical therapy specialty practice is that it is not limited to a set list of source material. While the items on the exam have supporting references, the item writers are not limited to a set list of references. Additionally, anybody who plays a role in the development of the exam (item writers, content experts, and Specialty Council) is not allowed to develop or assist in the development of a suggested reference list. Therefore, any reference list available no matter how old or new for any specialty exam was not developed by those who are actually involved in the creation the exam. So, do not judge the content of the exam based on any reference list. The DSP is the only document that defines the content areas for the exam.

In reference to the question regarding the benefit of the specialist designation, this too is very dependent on the individual's situation. The most consistent finding in studies of specialists (not just those in physical therapy) is the intrinsic benefits of increased knowledge and satisfaction of attaining a professional goal. Reported extrinsic benefits have been less consistent but include enhanced credibility, economic benefit, greater employment opportunities and more competitive in the job market. ABPTS (the board that oversees specialist certification in physical therapy) is currently completing a study on the benefits of specialty certification in physical therapy. The results of which should be published in a technical report soon.

I encourage you to contact any member of the Sports Specialty Council if you have any additional questions or would like further information on specialization in sports physical therapy.

If you share these personal and professional principles, then you are in the right place! Please join the growing number of physical therapists who have chosen this pathway of professional development. Visit the ABPTS website at <http://www.apta.org/AM/Template.cfm?Section=ABPTS1&Template=/TaggedPage/TaggedPageDisplay.cfm&TPLID=42&ContentID=14391>