



Taking on the Specialist Certification Exam— And Winning

Preparing for and taking the specialist certification exam aren't easy, but there are a variety of ways to study and plan.

by Sandra Conrad

Pursuing specialist certification is often touted as a natural, and highly desired, progression of a physical therapist's (PT) career path. The American Board of Physical Therapy Specialties (ABPTS) offers certifications to "individuals who have demonstrated advanced clinical knowledge and skills in physical therapy specialty areas."

However, to become a board-certified clinical specialist, you must first pass a rigorous exam that tests the application of your advanced knowledge and clinical skills.

"It's a grueling exam," said Megan Maupin, PT, DPT, OCS, at Progress Physical Therapy in Glen Allen, Virginia. "It's a lot of material, and you can't just know a little bit about all of it; you have to know a lot about the entire body."

"I don't think it's something anyone should sign up for on a whim," said Jacque Ruen, PT, DPT, OCS, ATC, staff PT, clini-

cal instructor, and research assistant at The Ohio State University. "Nobody really steps into that before preparing mentally, and professionally, and financially."

If you're considering specialty certification, it's important to familiarize yourself with the ins and outs of the nearly yearlong specialist certification exam process.

Committing to the Process

ABPTS offers specialist certification in 8 physical therapy areas: cardiovascular and pulmonary, clinical electrophysiology, geriatrics, neurology, orthopaedics, pediatrics, sports, and women's health.

The specialist certification exam is only offered once a year, and there's an 11-month span from the time you apply to the time you find out if you passed. Therefore, it's crucial that you have your plan in place well in advance. Applications are due in July to sit for the following year's exam. Test dates span a 2-week period, usually late February and early March. Exam applicants are notified of test results in June.

Before applying for the exam, make sure your current experience meets the eligibility require-



Jacque Ruen, PT, DPT, OCS, ATC, staff PT

ments for your particular practice. In addition to being licensed, you have to prove that you have at least 2,000 hours of clinical practice in your specialty area. Depending on your specialty, you may also need to show evidence of specific hours and competency areas.

You must include a nonrefundable fee with your application. When your application is approved, you pay a separate exam fee. The good news is that certifications are valid for 10 years, and there are no annual or maintenance fees. Also, some employers will reimburse part, if not all, of the exam fees.

You have 6 hours to complete the online exam. It is broken into 2 3-hour sections, with an optional break between the sections. The exam is multiple-choice, and it includes case studies and videos.

APTA advises specialist certification candidates to go through the prescribed *Description of Specialty Practice* document provided with their completed application before sitting for the specialty exam. “That should be the first step,” said Derek Stepp, APTA director of postprofessional certification and credentialing. “It describes the advanced knowledge, skills, and abilities for clinical practice in a specialty area.”

Candidates should then go through the corresponding self-assessment tool to assess their strengths and weaknesses on the items covered. “That helps gauge where they should focus their studies,” Stepp said.

The Residency Path to Certification

A residency program is one of the best and most effective ways of preparing for the exam. “We absolutely do encourage individuals, if that is an option for them, to go through a residency program,” Stepp said. “We really do feel that is an excellent way to prepare for the examination.”

Ruen completed her residency at Ohio State, and she obtained her Clinical Orthopaedic Specialist certification in 2010. “I actually practiced in the clinic for about 3 years before deciding to go for a specialist certification. At that point, I would have qualified to take the exam without a residency, but I wanted to do a residency because I didn’t feel like studying on my own was going to necessarily make me a better therapist.”

Ruen says choosing the residency route helped her improve her hands-on practice skills—and prepare for the specialist exam. “In a sense, it was kind of taken care of in the daily activities of the residency, but I did go back and significantly study.”

After completing her residency and specialist certification, Ruen has gained “a much broader understanding of what’s going on with people’s bodies. I also think I have a greater understanding of what specialists in other disciplines and specialty areas have going for them.”

Looking back, Ruen says she now has a better idea about the big picture of treating patients and the vision of the physical therapy profession as a whole. “It’s opened a lot of doors, probably more so with the resi-

dency than the specialty certification alone, in terms of networking and meeting people who are involved in the profession of physical therapy.”

Ruen credits her early work in a small outpatient hospital as helping her solidify her skills as a general practitioner before she embarked upon a residency and specialist certification. “For me, that was an incredibly valuable experience.”

For those considering specialist certification, Ruen cautions against specializing too soon in their career. “That’s my concern or warning for people that start to specialize really early. They sometimes lose that bigger picture and how those skills enhance their practice in a specialty rather than throwing those skills aside because they don’t necessarily play a large component in their specialty.”

“Whether you’ve decided to go the residency route or not, find other specialists who are in that area you want to practice in and gain some mentoring time with them,” Ruen said. “Getting into the inner workings of a specialist’s mind is what I found most valuable.”

When Residency Isn’t an Option

Although residencies have been a successful route to specialist certification for many, the problem, Stepp said, is that there aren’t enough residency programs to go around. Available residency slots don’t meet the demand for those interested in achieving the certification. “That’s why we have the other pathway, which is accumulating enough direct patient care hours to meet the depth and breadth of knowledge we feel is necessary to be successful on the examination.”

APTA doesn’t review or endorse any preparatory courses; however, it does provide guidance about self-assessments, suggested readings, and study group options. And some APTA sections, such as the Section on Geriatrics, are establishing mentorships for candidates.

For Anne Marie Bierman, PT, DPT, SCS, staff physical therapist at Accelerated Rehabilitation Center in Naperville, Illinois, residency wasn’t a viable option. She sat for her sports specialist exam in March 2012.

Although Bierman had considered residency, she never applied because it didn’t align with her family plans and would have meant leaving a job she really enjoyed. “It’s hard to leave when you like the people you work with, and you’re in a good situation.” Earning her specialist certification, however, was still on her to-do list. “I finally just hunkered down and did it.”

Bierman knew that attempting



Anne Marie Bierman,
PT, DPT, SCS

Timeline for Certification

Why consider becoming a board-certified clinical specialist?

- Show your expertise in a specialty area.
- Meet a personal challenge or achievement.
- Achieve a professional career goal.
- Earn a credential that reflects advanced practice to patients, physicians, and payers.

Assess your readiness to take the certification exam.

- Do you have a current license to practice physical therapy in the United States, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, or the Virgin Islands?
- Have you met the practice eligibility requirements including 2,000 hours minimum of direct patient care in the specialty area, 25% (500 hours) of which having occurred within the last 3 years?
- Have you met additional requirements specific to the specialty such as additional certifications, patient reports, case reflections? (See specific specialty application for these additional requirements.)
- Have you reviewed the *Self-Assessment Tool for Physical Therapists* in your designated specialty area, which is designed to help individuals evaluate current level of knowledge and skills in the specialty area?
- Additional preparation may have taken place through continuing education, completion of an APTA-credentialed postprofessional residency program, postprofessional degrees, advanced clinical expertise unique to specialized area of practice, etc.

Complete your application.

- Applications are due in July (see www.ABPTS.org for exact dates).
- Submit your application with the review fee.

Schedule the exam.

- Once notified that your application is accepted, submit the exam fee (due November 30).
- In December the Specialist Certification Program will notify you when you may begin to schedule a date to sit for the exam. You will need to obtain a scheduling permit prior to scheduling and to bring the permit with you on your examination date.

You've applied. Continue preparing.

- Review the *Description of Specialty Practice (DSP)* and *Self-assessment Tool* to assess your strengths and weaknesses and determine a strategy to augment your weaknesses.
- Consider joining a study group coordinated by the Specialist Certification Program.
- Some sections hold review courses related to advanced practice in their specialty areas. Applicants should contact their section directly to receive information. **Neither ABPTS nor the specialty councils review or endorse the content of review materials and courses.**
- Seek mentoring from board-certified specialists.

Be ready for exam day.

- Exams are offered once a year during a 2-week exam period in late February/early March. Computerized examinations are administered at Prometric Inc testing centers worldwide.
- The test format is approximately 200 multiple-choice questions including case scenarios, still images, and videos.

Await the exam results.

- Exam results are shared in June.

You will be recognized once you pass the exam.

- New and recertified specialists are recognized at a ceremony during APTA's annual Combined Sections Meeting.
- Specialists are included in the online Directory of Certified Specialists.
- Specialists may identify themselves as "Board-Certified Clinical Specialists" and are entitled to use the appropriate certified specialist credential.

the exam without the foundation a residency provides would be an added challenge. “If you haven’t gone through the residency, you’re really relying upon your own experiences, both in the clinic and on the field.”

A 17-week online prep course helped her fill in gaps. It included study guides, online video lectures, articles, reading, and weekly tests on key concepts. “That course really helped me keep on track.”

Although a residency would have given her more hands-on field experience versus the lecture and lab components of the online course, Bierman said she’s pleased with the outcome; she passed the exam. “If I hadn’t taken that course, there’s no way I would have passed.”

Her employer agreed to reimburse her for the specialty certification exam, as long as she passed.

When reflecting on the time between taking the exam and finding out that she passed, Bierman echoes a refrain familiar to many candidates. “It was a very anxious timeframe just waiting.”

Although it’s been less than a year since passing the exam, Bierman says that attaining her Clinical Sports Specialist certification has allowed her to expand her approach and add more research-based elements to her treatment plans. “With all of what I do on the soccer field, now I feel I do a better job, and it’s more research-based.”

Bierman says being certified improves her standing with physicians and makes her services more marketable. “They respect me a little bit more than just having that clinical experience,” Bierman said. “When I go into doctors’ offices I can say, ‘I’ve got this advanced certification, which, at the end of the day, is better for your patients.’”

Looking to the future, Bierman says her specialist certification has helped prepare her for a possible career in academics—or even the Olympic Games. “The Olympic Committee now allows DPTs with their SCS to do on-field coverage. Down the road, that would be fun.”

When Self-study Makes the Most Sense

Maupin also received her Clinical Orthopaedic Specialist certification in 2012. “I practiced a year before going for my certification,” she said. “I realized I was qualified and decided it was something I wanted to do.”

Her initial plan was to take the didactic portion of a residency as a base to prepare for the test. Unfortunately, her residency was delayed a year, so she decided to go ahead with the self-study route. “I can see how the residency would be a good preparation for it; I just didn’t have that ability,” Maupin said.

Instead, she formed a self-study group using the local contacts provided by APTA. “They give you the option

of getting on a list of everyone taking the exam that year. It gives you the ability to contact people in your area to study with,” Maupin said. “That was, by far, the most valuable, helpful item for studying that I used.”

She contacted a PT living nearby, and they started meeting on a regular basis. Soon, 2 other PTs joined the study group. They agreed they would only get as much out of the sessions as they put in, so they worked hard to keep each other accountable and motivated. “We all wanted to pass; we all had the same incentive,” Maupin said. They met for a few hours a week on Sundays. “It was so valuable. We got to practice and commiserate in the daunting task of tackling the entire body in preparing for the exam.”

Maupin says the study group helped her stay on top of things and not become overwhelmed as the test date drew closer. “Honestly, it was just tremendously helpful.”

Although she was excited and nervous to find out how she did on the exam, Maupin says she was “just glad to be done with the test. It was a big relief.” When the test results came in, Maupin’s study group received good news. “We all passed, which was fantastic.”

Of her group-study experience, Maupin says it takes having the right group. “If you have the right mindset going in, I think it’s definitely doable.”

Since earning her specialist certification, Maupin finds she’s more effective in her treatments. “From a professional perspective, I feel much more confident in how I treat. I use a lot of the evidence-based things I learned preparing for the exam in my practice.” Maupin says her certification has also proven helpful in negotiating salaries and positions. “It’s been a nice talking point to signify as a therapist what my credentials are and what I’m capable of.” The most rewarding part of having her specialty certification came when new patients chose her because of her credentials. “It meant a lot, to know they picked me because of my credentials. Jobs come and go, but if I can more effectively make a difference in a patient’s life, that’s what it’s all about.”

Maupin’s employer allowed her to count her specialist certification exam as continuing education and covered half of her exam costs. She recommends PTs approach their employers about reimbursement because the employers benefit from the specialist’s increased marketing and referral potential. “It is expensive, but if you can talk with your employer, there are a lot of incentives for them to help fund you.” Of her overall certification experience, Maupin said, “You have to know that you’re going to be there for a while. It’s definitely a commitment—with your time and with your money. But it’s very, very much worth it.” ■