

cam basics

Credentialing CAM Providers: Understanding CAM Education, Training, Regulation, and Licensing



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A physician's credentials—the licenses, certificates, and diplomas on the office walls—tell us about that person's professional qualifications to advise and treat us. We seek similar assurances when we choose a complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) practitioner, such as an acupuncturist, a chiropractor, or a massage therapist. This fact sheet provides a general overview of the status of CAM credentialing, summarizes licensure for selected types of CAM practitioners, and suggests sources for additional information.

Key Points

- Credentialing is a broad term encompassing licensure and other mechanisms that states use to regulate a particular type of practice, as well as separate processes that professional organizations use to certify that individuals have met specified education/training and practice standards. As with all health care professions, licensure of CAM practitioners takes place at the state level.
- The status of CAM credentialing varies greatly from state to state and from one profession to another. For example, some CAM professions are licensed in all or most states, although specific requirements for training, testing, and continuing education may vary. Other CAM professions may be licensed in only a few states or not at all.
- Regulations, licenses, or certificates do not guarantee safe, effective treatment from any provider—conventional or CAM.

Overview

Credentialing refers to the process of establishing practitioners' qualifications for providing services to patients. In both conventional medicine and CAM, states and professional organizations have this responsibility. States may use a variety of mechanisms to regulate a particular type of practice and protect

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consumers. Such mechanisms may entail mandatory licensure (i.e., the state prohibits unlicensed individuals from providing a particular service) or “title licensure” (the state requires an individual to meet specified requirements in order to use a particular professional title). Another option is registration—the process of registering a practice and disclosing information about training and experience to a state consumer protection agency. In addition, a state may use an exemption mechanism, in which certain CAM providers are exempt from licensing laws and allowed to practice if they make appropriate disclosures to consumers and meet other specified requirements.

Professional organizations may certify practitioners who meet specified education/training and practice standards. Certification by professional organizations is independent of state licensing efforts.

There is no standardized, national system for credentialing CAM practitioners, as a whole, to provide services. The extent and type of credentialing vary greatly from state to state and from one CAM profession to another. In general, however, if a state regulates a professional practice at all, it uses one of the mechanisms noted above—or a combination of these mechanisms. The box on page 3 summarizes the status of credentialing for several CAM professions.

Education and Training

For some types of CAM, the U.S. Department of Education (DOE) authorizes specific organizations to accredit education/training programs. For example, DOE has authorized the Council on Chiropractic Education to accredit chiropractic colleges and the Accreditation Commission for Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine to accredit acupuncture programs. DOE accreditation only applies to education and training programs; individual states are responsible for licensing CAM practitioners.

Some professional organizations have established national written and/or oral examinations for graduates of accredited programs. Examples of organizations that offer national exams include the National Board of Chiropractic Examiners (NBCE), the National Certification Commission for Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine (NCCAOM), the American Association of Naturopathic Physicians, and the National Certification Board for Therapeutic Massage and Bodywork.

Regulation and Licensing

The Federal Government does not regulate CAM or license CAM practitioners. The individual states have this authority as part of their U.S. constitutional mandate to regulate health, safety, and welfare. Typically, regulation involves some form of licensure. Licensure generally involves completing a specified amount of training, passing a written exam (sometimes a practical exam is also required), and meeting requirements for continuing education.

State regulation of CAM practices varies significantly. A particular type of CAM might be regulated in some states but not others, or states might have different requirements for practitioners or different ways of defining scope of practice (what a licensed practitioner may and may not do). For example, some state laws specifically permit acupuncture practitioners

to use dietary supplements in their practice, while other states specifically prohibit their use by acupuncturists. Some types of CAM are regulated by only a few states. Some CAM providers—herbalists, hypnotherapists, energy healers, mind-body practitioners, and others—generally lack specific state health care licensure for these practices, although some states apply an exemption mechanism to such practices.

In general, physicians, because they are authorized by state law to diagnose and treat disease, may provide CAM therapies such as nutritional counseling, herbal medicine, biofeedback, and hypnotherapy. However, states may or may not allow other licensed health care providers (conventional or CAM) to provide such therapies, or may not have laws addressing the question at all. Some states expressly include acupuncture in medical doctor and doctor of osteopathic medicine licensure, and some require additional training or an exam. In some states, a physician referral is required for acupuncture services.

Professional Certification

Professional membership organizations of CAM providers may offer some form of certification to their members, based on criteria established by the individual organizations. Certification by a professional organization almost always is a prerequisite for state licensure. Many states, for example, require NCCAOM certification for licensed acupuncturists.

Licensure of Selected Types of CAM Practitioners*

Acupuncture

- **States with licensure:** 42 states and the District of Columbia.
- **Education:** 3 years or 1,905 hours, including Chinese herbology and clinical practice; some states require training in anatomy, physiology, and pathology.
- **Examination:** Most states require the NCCAOM written exam, or a state written exam. Some states also require the Practical Examination of Point Location Skills (PEPLS), or a state practical exam.
- **Continuing education:** 16 states require some continuing education units (CEUs); average is 15 hours per year.

Note: This information applies to nonphysician acupuncturists.

Chiropractic

- **States with licensure:** 50 states and the District of Columbia.
- **Education:** 4-5 years or 4,200 hours, including basic medical sciences and clinical experience.
- **Examination:** All states accept or require the NBCE written exam. Forty states also accept or require the NBCE practical exam.
- **Continuing education:** Most states require some CEUs; specific requirements vary widely from state to state.

Homeopathy

- **States with licensure:** 3 states; licensure as a homeopathic physician is available only to practitioners holding an M.D. or D.O. degree in Arizona, Connecticut, and Nevada.
- **Education:** Arizona requires 300 hours of training. Nevada requires 6 months. Connecticut does not specify training requirements.
- **Examination:** Each licensing state administers its own oral or written exam.
- **Continuing education:** Only Nevada requires CEUs (20 hours per year).

Massage Therapy

- **States with licensure:** 43 states and the District of Columbia.
- **Education:** Training requirements range from 100 to 1,000 hours, with most states requiring a minimum of 500 hours. Some states require graduation from a training program approved by the Commission on Massage Therapy Accreditation (COMTA) or an equivalent program, or training in a specific area such as anatomy.
- **Examination:** Most states that license massage therapists require a passing grade on the Massage and Bodywork Licensing Exam (MBLEx) or one of two exams provided by the National Certification Board for Therapeutic Massage and Bodywork.
- **Continuing education:** 29 states and the District of Columbia require some CEUs; specific requirements vary from state to state.

Naturopathy

- **States with licensure:** 15 states and the District of Columbia.
- **Education:** 4-year postgraduate program, including natural sciences, clinical sciences, and natural therapeutics.
- **Examination:** Naturopathic Physicians Licensing Examination (NPLEX) written exam, usually covering basic sciences and clinical examinations in a variety of areas.
- **Continuing education:** 14 states and the District of Columbia require some CEUs; specific requirements vary from state to state.

* Most information is extracted from Eisenberg DM, Cohen MH, Hrbek A, et al. Credentialing complementary and alternative medical providers. *Annals of Internal Medicine*. 2002;137(12):965-973 (Table 1, p. 966-967). The authors of the article verified the information as of July 2001. More recent information is available on the Web sites of some CAM professional organizations; where possible, such updated information has been substituted here.

NCCAM's Role

The National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM) is the Federal Government's lead agency for scientific research on CAM. NCCAM's mission is to define, through rigorous scientific investigation, the usefulness and safety of complementary and alternative medicine interventions and their roles in improving health and health care. NCCAM does not participate in credentialing CAM practitioners.

If You Are Thinking About Using CAM

- Gather information on the CAM therapy that interests you. Find out what scientific studies have been done on the therapy's safety and effectiveness. The NCCAM Clearinghouse and other resources listed below (see "For More Information") are a good place to start. The NCCAM Clearinghouse also has publications with tips for being an informed consumer of CAM services and products.
- Although CAM credentialing practices are in flux, you might be able to find information on whether and how a particular CAM therapy is regulated in your area by checking with a nearby hospital or medical school, the state medical board or other relevant professional boards, state or local health regulatory agencies, or national professional associations.
- Before you begin a CAM therapy, ask about the provider's training and experience in treating your condition.
- Do not use a CAM therapy as a replacement for proven conventional care or as a reason to postpone seeing a physician about a medical problem.
- Tell all your health care providers about any CAM practices you use. Give them a full picture of what you do to manage your health. This will help ensure coordinated and safe care. For tips about talking with your health care providers about CAM, see NCCAM's Time to Talk campaign at nccam.nih.gov/timetotalk/.

Selected References

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For More Information

NCCAM Clearinghouse

The NCCAM Clearinghouse provides information on CAM and NCCAM, including publications and searches of Federal databases of scientific and medical literature. The Clearinghouse does not provide medical advice, treatment recommendations, or referrals to practitioners.

Toll-free in the U.S.: 1-888-644-6226

TTY (for deaf and hard-of-hearing callers): 1-866-464-3615

Web site: nccam.nih.gov

E-mail: info@nccam.nih.gov

PubMed®

A service of the National Library of Medicine (NLM), PubMed contains publication information and (in most cases) brief summaries of articles from scientific and medical journals.

Web site: www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/sites/entrez

DIRLINE

DIRLINE, another service of NLM, is a database that contains locations and descriptive information for a variety of health-related organizations, including CAM associations and organizations.

Web site: dirline.nlm.nih.gov

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