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The Decision to Specialize: Accounts of Nine Board-Certified Specialists
By L Caitlin Smith

The decision to become a board-certified clinical specialist is more than just a choice to take a test: It’s a change in one’s “lifestyle” as a physical therapist—from preparation, to the exam itself, to the effect of one’s new credentials on others’ perception. More and more physical therapists (PTs) are choosing this “lifestyle” as the numbers of those who take and pass the exams grow each year. To date, there are 3,205 certified clinical specialists in seven areas of physical therapy practice—Cardiovascular and Pulmonary, Clinical Electrophysiology, Geriatrics, Neurology, Orthopaedic, Pediatrics, and Sports Physical Therapy. Here, nine specialists share their personal experiences and offer encouragement and advice for those who are considering specialist certification.

While they can’t give you their study notes (damn, they say!), they can tell you how they felt about achieving certification and the effect it has had on their clinical lives.
Dianne V. Jewell, PT, MS, CCS
Assistant Professor, Department of Physical Therapy
Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia

"I achieved board certification in cardiovascular and pulmonary physical therapy in 1994. I chose to specialize because I spent the first 4½ years of my career working in acute and outpatient cardiovascular and pulmonary settings with an emphasis in heart and lung transplantation. As I accumulated more and more experience in this area, it became clear that the credential of specialist would reflect my advanced level of practice in a way that patients, employers, colleagues, and referral sources would recognize and appreciate.

As a first step toward specialization I contacted APTA to obtain a copy of what was then called Physical Therapy Advanced Clinical Competencies: Cardiopulmonary. I used this document as a self-assessment tool to evaluate my content knowledge strengths and weaknesses and to guide my approach to reviewing relevant material. I also accessed textbooks and journals that offered clinical cases for me to use for review and 'quizzing' myself in order to prepare for the CCS examination, which is heavily case-based in its format.

"I didn't have a specific career objective in mind when I chose to specialize. Nevertheless, many doors have opened to me since becoming a specialist, including involvement at the national level in both APTA [Specialty Council on Cardiovascular and Pulmonary Physical Therapy and Section president] and the American Association of Cardiovascular and Pulmonary Rehabilitation [board of directors, program committee, publications committee]. On a local level I have become a resource to staff, students, patients, and others interested in cardiovascular and pulmonary issues.

"Really, the sky is the limit depending on one's career goals and one's willingness to keep an open mind to the opportunities made available to them. My advice to aspiring specialists is to contact the APTA Specialist Certification Department for information about the myriad resources that are available now to help one prepare for the exam. (There are many more options than I had in 1993.) In addition, it is helpful to network with other specialists—the specialty

What Is Specialist Certification?

Established in 1978 by the APTA House of Delegates, specialist certification is the process by which a physical therapist (PT) 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.

Its creators looked to the specialist certification program as a means of providing formal recognition to physical therapists who had advanced clinical knowledge, experience, and skills in a certain area of physical therapy. It was also a way to gain more public recognition for these skills from other health care organizations and patients/clients.

The American Board of Physical Therapy Specialties (ABPTS) coordinates and oversees the specialist certification process and is the governing body for certification and recertification of clinical specialists. ABPTS is responsible for recommending to the APTA House of Delegates the areas for which specialty practice will be defined. It oversees the activities of specialty councils that are appointed to undertake activities such as delineating the advanced knowledge, skills, and abilities for their specialty areas and developing the assessment tools for certification and recertification in collaboration with the testing agency. There are now seven areas of specialization—Cardiovascular and Pulmonary, Clinical Electrophysiology, Geriatrics, Neurology, Orthopedic, Pediatrics, and Sports Physical Therapy—and seven corresponding specialty councils.

Goals of the Specialization Process

The Specialist Certification Program has several goals. First, it is a way to identify and develop appropriate areas of specialty practice in physical therapy. Second, it promotes development of the clinical science underlying each specialty area of practice as well as the highest possible level of care for patients who seek physical therapy services in each specialization area. It also allows those patients (as well as other health care professionals) to identify certified clinical specialists.

"Specialist certification can open new doors for you as a professional," says Andrea Blake, director of the Specialist Certification Department at APTA. According to Blake, board-certified specialists report many professional and personal benefits from achieving certification, including increased career opportunities; additional prestige in clinical and academic settings; a positive impact on patient care, referrals, and consultations; increased peer recognition; a sense of personal satisfaction; and generally a more interesting or fulfilling career.

"Yet, their work is not done when the exam is completed. By virtue of their professional distinction, certified clinical specialists are encouraged to act as mentors in their field. "Hundreds of certified clinical specialists contribute their time each year to the specialist certification program," says Blake. "Volunteer opportunities are varied and some involve only a small time commitment. Certified clinical specialists can serve as item writers or reviewers to develop examination questions, participate on standard-setting committees, or serve as members of the specialty councils or ABPTS. Other certified clinical specialists (and section members) are called upon to complete a practice analysis survey to help define an area of specialty practice within physical therapy."

The purpose of this volunteer encouragement is to spread the word about the benefits of specialist certification and to encourage PTs interested in focusing their careers in a specific area to consider the benefits of its credentials.

For more information on specialist certification, including links to applications, frequently asked questions, minimum eligibility requirements, and examination details, visit www.apta.org/Education/specialist or e-mail APTA's Specialist Certification Department at spec-cert@apta.org. Applications for the 2002 specialist certification examinations can be downloaded from APTA's Web site at no charge. The deadline for submitting applications is July 31, 2001.
council members would be a great place to start for this kind of opportunity.”

Laurence N Benz, PT, ECS, OCS
CEO, Kentucky Orthopedic Rehab Team,
Elizabethtown, Kentucky

“My specializations are in clinical electrophysiology and orthopedics. I’m a big believer in promotion of specialization, and I chose to pursue it so that I could be an example to the therapists with whom I work. Also, being specialized carries with it an element of prestige.

“Since becoming specialized, I have had many opportunities to work in the promotion of board specialization, speaking on related clinical specialties to peers, and marketing physical therapy.

“The best advice I have for someone interested in specializing: Focus on your area by doing lots of clinical work, spending time with a specialist mentor, keeping abreast of current clinical thinking, and taking advantage of reputable continuing education opportunities.”

Kendra Fuller, PT, NCS
South Valley Physical Therapy, Denver,
Colorado; University of Colorado Hospital
Outpatient Physical Therapy

“I chose to take the exam for personal reasons. I thought it would challenge my knowledge base, as well as make me more current in the field in order to provide better intervention.

“Because of the interaction I have with other specialists, I became more involved with the Neurology Section, and attended the national conferences on a regular basis. This provided a great network, and my connections have allowed me to be involved in teaching in the academic setting and in continuing education. I also have had the opportunity to be involved in professional writing by being responsible for the neurological section of the text Pathology: Implications for the Therapist.

“I believe that APTA provides great support for the process of specialization. If you are preparing for the test, consider going through the list of specialists, finding someone in your area, and making him or her your ‘study buddy.’ In addition to answering your questions, her or she can provide moral support and help you get connected when you become a specialist.”

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Nancy M Prickett, PT, MA, GCS, NCS
Aspen Physical Therapy, Mt Holly, New Jersey

"My practice developed out of my specializations in geriatrics and neurology. I chose geriatrics because there is a need for physical therapy in nursing homes. My first love, however, is neurology, which I've been intrigued with since my first job.

"Due to my specialization, I now regularly teach (in fact, almost too much!) in several academic programs. I've also been asked to write various articles and chapters and to edit a book. I've spoken at continuing education events for physical therapists, as well as community events such as Parkinson disease support groups. I have been an expert witness in several court cases, and served as a Medicare consultant to the Office of the Inspector General for two national studies.

"In these and many other ways, specialization was a real boost to my 17-year career. It really revitalized my interest in physical therapy. I have met many specialist physical therapists from all areas of study, both through the process and at APTA's Combined Sections Meeting. Getting to know them has added to my network of colleagues, which is just icing on the cake of specialization. Being a specialist also has honed my leadership skills, and it has given me a much more thorough appreciation of APTA.

"If you are considering specialization, my advice is to consider how this qualification will be integrated into your career. It is a wonderful personal achievement and it opens so many doors to you as a professional. Let your career take off as a specialist. Mine did."

Florence Thillet-Bice PT, MA, PCS
Caddo Parish Schools, Shreveport, Louisiana; Louisiana State University Health Sciences Center

"I thought that the specialization process was an excellent way for me to review my competencies and the areas where I needed to improve. Studying for the test certainly helped me achieve that goal. I also chose to participate because making it through the process gave me a sense of self-accomplishment and reward.

"The process of becoming a specialist made me a better therapist. That is because it has inspired me to keep abreast of the most current research. It also has increased my personal expectations of what I give to this profession. And it has exposed me to other areas of expertise as a member of the ABPTS specialty council. The experience of preparation for the examina-

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tion is fulfilling in itself. It is a comprehensive self-study that forces you to analyze your own strong and weak points.

My advice: Take time to study. If possible, get involved in a study group. Find a mentor to support you through the process. Do not wait until the last minute to prepare. Review the current literature and ask experts in your weak areas to assist you in finding appropriate literature. If possible, follow the expert for a few days to gain basic knowledge in that weak area. Most important, treat this as the challenge it is and use it as an opportunity to move away from your comfort zone.”

Steve Hoffman, PT, SCS, ATC
Private practice owner, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

“I believe that specialist certification is the standard by which physical therapists who focus their practice in a specific niche should operate. Specialization sets you apart by providing validation that you have achieved an advanced level of expertise in your specialty area.

“Specialization has affected my career in many ways. One of the most significant changes, however, is that I enjoy greater credibility when promoting my services to patients, referring physicians, and insurance companies.

“The best advice I can offer an aspiring specialist is to keep abreast of current trends in practice. The best way to do that is reading. Absorb any literature that applies to your chosen specialty. That is one way you will be best prepared for the examination.

“Since specialization is an advanced designation, you must also be aware that it comes with a certain amount of responsibility. Certified clinical specialists are looked to as leaders in their professional community and as such should be physical therapy’s biggest promoters.”

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Jennifaye V Brown, PT, NCS
President, JVB Physical Therapy Services, Inc,
Stone Mountain, Georgia

“I became involved in the Specialist Certification Program because I wanted to quantify and define my skills in neurology in some type of measurable way that would be recognized by the public and by my colleagues. I felt it would also add credibility to my skills as a physical therapist.

“However, specialization should not be viewed as a cure-all. For example, specialization did not afford me better opportunities in my previous job, and I decided to further enhance my skills in neuro-rehabilitation by taking advanced courses in neurology and neuro-developmental treatment. I then started seeing patients with neurological impairment in their homes—those who were no longer receiving physical therapy for numerous reasons yet who had potential to improve. I decided to start my own business and teach others about what I learned from that experience.

“I think it’s important that therapists who are considering specialization go into the process with the intention of obtaining advanced knowledge and clinical skills specifically for the benefit of their patients. You can’t count on an employer to recognize and appreciate your skills—you have to do this for yourself. And for me, specialization has proven to be a worthwhile investment. I now run a therapist-owned business providing neurologic physical therapy and continuing education. People are now seeking me out because they value my skills, and that is a great feeling.”

Lori Thein Brody, PT, MS, SCS, ATC
Senior Clinical Specialist, University of
Wisconsin Clinics Research Park, Madison,
Wisconsin; Rocky Mountain University of
Health Professions, Provo, Utah

“I chose to specialize for both personal and professional reasons. Personally, I wanted to do a self-study to ensure that I was up-to-date in the practice of sports physical therapy. I could study at my own pace and focus on my own areas of weakness. Taking and passing the exam provided the benchmark for a standard of care that I wanted to achieve. Professionally, I wanted a credential to validate for my patients that I had achieved a certain level of expertise in sports physical therapy.

“Specialization opened many doors for professional writing, speaking, and engaging in professional service. It provided access to a physical therapy faculty position teaching clinical courses.

“My best advice: Set a goal, make a plan, and do it. The process is a remarkable learning experience that you will not regret. Also, be sure to do a self-assessment so that your time is spent focusing on areas you need to strengthen.”
The Decision to Specialize

Kathleen M Gill-Body, PT, MS, NCS
Clinical Associate Professor, MGH Institute of Health Professions, Boston, Massachusetts

"I chose to specialize because I wanted to focus my clinical practice and teaching in an area that really interested me and in which I could continue to gain in-depth knowledge and skills over time. I felt that I could be a better clinician if I focused my practice, while still staying abreast of other practice areas so that I could feel competent in a general practice setting as well.

"I also felt I was at a level that deserved to be recognized as advanced, both in my clinical decision making and in my skills as a neurology physical therapist. Taking the exam was a way for me to verify whether or not this was true.

"Participating in this process means you must be willing to compare your own knowledge and skills with a standard set by others in the field who do not know you. It is truly an objective test.

"I think that I have had many doors open to me that otherwise would not have been were I not an NCS. Examples include invitations to speak across the country, write book chapters and articles, participate in research projects, and teach courses.

"Additionally, I find that physicians who seek a PT in my area of practice generally ask first, 'Do you know of a board-certified therapist in this area?' Consequently, I get a lot of referrals from all over New England, and from individuals who have found out I am board certified from either another PT or from the APTA Web site.

"You can’t be afraid to put yourself on the line by taking the exam! The decision to take the exam was the most difficult part for me, but I essentially got to a point when I had spoken to others who had gone through the process many times and simply had to decide if I had the courage.

"The turning point for me was talking with another applicant who had taken the exam yet who had not passed, by a very small margin. She was so optimistic about the process, however, that she planned on taking it again. She just kept raving about how much she had learned and how excited she was to know that she was so close. She was so confident she would pass the exam the second time that I thought, ‘If she can take the exam twice, I can certainly take it once!’ So I did. And I’ve never regretted the choice."

I. Caitlin Smith is a freelance writer based in northern Virginia.

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