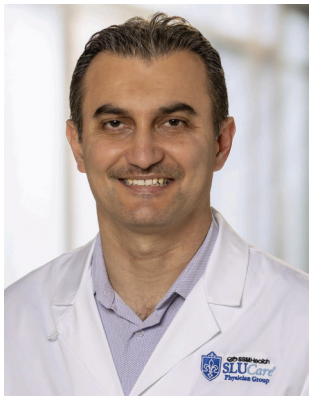
Young Professionals



A New Diplomate's Perspective: Reflections on Achieving ABNM Certification:

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Nuclear medicine has changed significantly in recent years, predominantly driven by advances in the Theranostic field. These advances caused a paradigm shift in training and, subsequently, the path for certification. This is in addition to the discovery of novel diagnostic agents in neurology, cardiology, and oncology. Achieving certification is not simply an examination of knowledge, but a synthesis of years of clinical experience and technical mastery.

Preparation for the ABNM board is uniquely demanding because it spans a wide intellectual spectrum. Unlike narrower subspecialty exams, the ABNM requires fluency across diagnostic imaging, radiopharmaceutical science, physics, instrumentation, radiation safety, and therapeutic applications. During training, this breadth often feels fragmented, oscillating between PET physics one day and treating a new patient the next. In the final months of preparation, however, a shift occurs. Concepts that once seemed isolated begin to integrate.

Let me share with you the major takeaways from my journey, which I consider somewhat unique, as I finished 3 years of ACGME accredited residency followed by a 1-year non-ACGME accredited PET/CT fellowship. I was fortunate to train in a supportive environment that provided me with a strong foundation. Without this, I could not have achieved my educational goals nor passed the ABNM board exam.

Master the Physics and Basics of technology:

There is no question that the foundation of nuclear medicine is physics and technology. In my first year of residency, I focused on understanding the basics rather than the wording of my dictations. My program director taught me that whenever I was studying a topic, I should go to the technologists and ask them to show me how they acquired it, which helped me tremendously. It allowed me to master the protocols and techniques in clinical practice and not just regurgitate what I read in the textbooks. Therefore, a trainee should always be proactive and not rely on passive learning.

Maximize your Rotations:

Take full advantage of rotations during the academic years. Diagnostic radiology rotations are a must. Body CT and MR are essential to have integrated into any program. A considerable amount of ABNM questions test your diagnostic radiology competency. Looking beyond the exam, some centers now even have PET/MR scanners, so MR rotations alongside CT rotations are valuable in clinical practice as well. In addition, our program director created a unique oncology rotation. I was interested in the rotation and was the first in my program to do so. My experience there helped me better understand the clinical perspective and know what oncologists actually need from our report and impressions to plan their next step in managing patient care. This also assisted my understanding and answering of clinical questions during both training and on the ABNM exam.

Learn Theranostics:

Take all opportunities to be involved in therapies, you have to be actively involved in providing therapies and take all the opportunity to learn and apply your knowledge. Our center became designated as a Comprehensive Radiopharmaceutical Therapy Center of Excellence, and I am proud to be a part of it now. I understand my training was somewhat unique with all Radiopharmaceutical therapies being performed by Nuclear Medicine and not Radiation Oncology. I cannot stress enough about the importance of therapies in the exam and in practice. When transitioning from training and certification to clinical practice, a physician will have to learn how to be independent in the therapeutic approach.

Learn from IR and Surgical Suite:

Example is Y90 therapy and operating room gamma probe lymphoscintigraphy. Go and learn, there is always a nice operator that can open the door for you.

Attend Tumor Boards:

Participate in tumor boards even though you might not be directly involved as a second- or third-year resident. Regular tumor board attendance will broaden your knowledge and tune your diagnostic skills over time. This is one of the few opportunities to be able to learn from multiple different types of clinicians in one setting and understand the mindset to help formulate a concise and relevant report.

Learn new tracers and engage with clinical trials if available:

Our program stands out for the diversity of the clinical trials we are involved with, both qualitatively and quantitatively. In these trials, I was exposed to new radiopharmaceuticals such as alpha-emitters, FAPI ligand tracers, Pb203/212, and more. Working in clinical trials will not only build experience but keep you up to date. By the time you finish residency, you might see some of the tracers you encountered in trials approved for clinical use. I remember when I started residency in 2022 when Lu-177 PSMA (Pluvicto) was just approved for third line therapy for Castrate resistant prostate cancer. I worked in clinical trials to investigate the use of Pluvicto as second- and first-line therapy. By the end of my residency, the FDA approved it as a second line! This made me feel like I had a role in helping advance the scientific community.

Utilize SNMMI Resources

The society website is a wonderful resource. Check it regularly, look for learning webinars and follow the board review lectures as both are great ways to refresh concepts. Participation in the annual meetings over zoom or in person will also provide valuable information and improve practical and theoretical knowledge. Lastly, I recommend trying to write an abstract to submit to the annual SNMMI meeting, even just one during residency. Having your own project is valuable preparation for working independently and becoming involved in academia.

Regardless of how many resources are available to you through your program, always remember that the path to certification is a way to build your professional identity. It requires perseverance, advanced level of training, dedication, years of valuable experience, and genuine passion in the field.

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