



How to **Painlessly** Re-Certify in Medical Oncology

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Re-Certification is a fact of life. Like growing up and eventually having a mortgage and grey hairs, this is something that has come with time and it is here to stay (hair coloring not included). So, rather than bemoan the whole experience, why not find a way to make it as painless as possible?

Well this is what this writing is all about.

What follows below is a **"things I wish someone would have told me" about re-certifying** sort of thing. Sort of like things you wish someone would have told you about Mr. Kennedy's Chemistry Class in High School - before you got there.

#1. What is the **Re-certification Process and How does it work?**

The re-certification process is a process whereby the American Board of Internal Medicine has now made it so that your Board Certification in Medical Oncology (and Hematology and Internal Medicine for that matter) is no longer a "for life" certificate and it thus needs to be renewed or "re-certified" every 10 years.

If you were lucky enough to have passed the Medical Oncology Board exam before, I think, 1989 or so, you were "grandfathered in" and were given "Board Certification For Life" without the need to re-certify every 10 years. But for all of us who were not that lucky, re-certification is something we need to do in order to keep our Board Certification in force.

The thing with the whole re-certification process is that it can be terribly confusing. Many, many oncologists say "Geez, I'm just not sure exactly what I have to do in order to do that whole re-certification thing. It's so confusing". Thus, in the spirit with which we do everything at **www.HemeOncJobs.com** - i.e. as a service to help our brethren in the Heme/Onc world (which is why our logo is a globe of the world), we thought to make this "**things I wish someone would have told me**" writing to help as many people as possible out there.

So, grab a seat, get yourself a cup of Darjeeling or a Grande Latte and let's go through this together - and make it as painless as possible.

#2. Start the process early.

Start it **as soon as you are eligible to start.**

The ABIM (American Board of Internal Medicine) allows you to start on your re-certification a few years before your Board Certification expires. Trust me, that's the thing to do.

Take this advice along with the advice someone gave you to not touch a really cold metal pole in the school yard with the tip of your tongue in subzero weather. Trust me, it's a good idea to follow this advice.

Find out when is the **earliest time** when you can start your re-certification and go for it. Start doing it a little bit at a time.

Do a little on Sunday before the ball game. Log on and spend 15 minutes. If your team loses, spend another 15 minutes after the game doing some more. If they win, well, then put off doing some more for another day.

Do a little on Saturday when you're waiting for company to come over.

Do a little on a weekend when you're not on call.

Do a little in the evening after you and your spouse come home from the movies.

It doesn't matter what time of the day you do it, but the key is that if you start a few years before your certificate expires and do a little of it once or twice a week for a few years you will recertify painlessly.

Another good thing about starting early is that if you're rusty and you take the written re-certification exam and fail it, you can spare yourself the awkwardness of having to tell your colleagues that you flunked it (unless you enjoy self-punishment...but that is a topic for another discussion), because if you start years before your certificate expires and you flunk the exam, you still have a valid certificate and it's no one's business if you are working on your re-certification or not - and you can just take the exam again in 6 months when it is offered again.



#2 100 pounds of Fruit But **oranges** need to be a part of the mix. **oranges** = **The Practice Improvement Module**

Here's the key. The way re-certification works is that they want you to have 100 pounds of fruit. As long as you have **oranges** in the mix, by and large, they don't care what other kinds of fruits you have in your basket of 100 pounds of fruit.

You can have bananas, pears, apples, apricots and even kiwi fruit if you like, but **as long as you have oranges in there** and you end up with a total of 100 pounds of fruit, they're happy.

So what does that mean?

That means that they want you to accumulate 100 points of questions but just like with the **oranges**, you have to have what is known as a **Practice Improvement Module** in the mix.

No matter what you do, you're going to have to do one of those "wonderful" (weak attempt at sarcasm here) Practice Improvement Modules (or PIM for short). These are rather long and labor intensive things where you have to send out a bunch of questionnaires to your patients and gather their opinions on things. In some of these PIMs, they also give you a choice if you wish to gather together a bunch of your patient's charts and answer questions about how things are done in your practice. I know, I know. Really fun stuff, but it has to be done.

Until (and if) they change the rules, you must do one of those Practice Improvement Modules (or PIMs) in order to re-certify your boards. No amount of whining or procrastinating or wishing it away or telling yourself "I'm a good doc why do I have to go through this?" is going to make it go away. These are just the rules and it's easier to do like Nike and "just do it" rather than make it worse by putting it off. Just open wide and take the castor oil and think of it as liquid caviar.

Following along with our "painless" mantra, as long as you HAVE to do one of these long PIM things, start the PIM right at the beginning when you are starting to do your re-certification and work on it slowly and simultaneously as you gather the other fruit for your basket. Man how I wish someone would have told me this when I recertified.

You run around, gather a banana or a kiwi or two and then take a break and spend a few moments on your oranges (i.e. your PIM) sending out those surveys which are part of the PIM, gathering the surveys which have been returned and recording the information from the survey, finding out how many more surveys you need, etc. You keep that up for a couple of years and the big bad PIM will seem like the time when you went to meet your in-laws for the first time. After it was all over you said to yourself "wow, that wasn't that bad".

#3 Just the facts Ma'am

Find some **question groups** you like.

The next thing to do is to look through the list of question groups which are available for you to choose and choose some you like. These are your bananas, kiwi fruits and apricots. You have to put these things into your basket and, along with your **oranges** (see above) when it's all said and done, you need to have a total of 100 pounds of fruit (or points) in your basket.

The key to remember about these point questions things is that they are **forgiving**. Yes, that's right forgiving. This is particularly a different situation as, for example, compared to when you last forgot your anniversary. That was not as forgiving, but this one is.

By forgiving this means that you answer the questions to the best of your abilities and submit your answers. They do not then answer things like "What? Are you kidding me? You dummy, what were you thinking?" No. Instead they gently tell you which ones you got wrong and let you go look them up and learn why you got them wrong and come back and answer the question again. Really? Yes really.

The key is to remember that they do not let you just submit your answers again and again right there at that moment. Why not? Well, it's because what they're trying to do is to help you review and stay up to date in oncology, not see how long you can sit in front of your computer doing the same thing over and over. Thus, after you submit your answers, you may not submit answers again for something like 24 hours. This is to give you time to think about your answers, look up the ones you got wrong and come back and answer things again.

Each group of questions you do, such as "Oncology Update for 2010" or "Hematology Update for 2009" or "Recent Advances in Internal Medicine" is a fruit. A banana or a kiwi fruit or an apricot for your 100 pound basket of fruit. As with fruit, each of these question groups "weighs" a certain amount of points. Thus, let's say that the "Oncology Update for 2010" is worth 10 points. Well once you have answered all of those questions correctly, you get 10 points. Then you go on to the

"Hematology Update for 2009" and eventually do all of **those** questions correctly. Well, when you complete those, you will get another 10 points. This now means that you will thus have a total of 20 points towards your recertification at that point. Then, for example, you go on and do a "Recent Advances in Internal Medicine" and get another, let's say, 10 more points. Well, when you do that, you would then have accumulated a total of 30 points (of the 100 points they want you to have) towards your oncology re-certification.

But here's the key. Remember that **at the same time** as you are doing your "Oncology Update for 2010" or your "Recent Advances in Internal Medicine" questions, you are supposed to be taking a break from these from time to time and **working on your oranges - i.e. your PIM**. Because you cannot graduate high school unless you take Physical Ed and you can't re-certify unless you have **oranges - i.e. a PIM** - in your basket. So don't forget to take some moments aside and to work on your PIM at the same time as you are working on your "Oncology Update for 2010" questions. A nice thing is that they give you points for the PIM as well. Thus, if the PIM is giving you, say, 30 points, then all you need is to accumulate a total of 70 other points with the other question groups.

Think of it as if the Boards require 100 pounds of fruit of which 30 pounds have to be of **oranges** and the other 70 pounds can be made up of the other fruit you chose.

#4 Taking the Recertification Written Exam

This is sort of like the guy in midtown Manhattan who asks someone for directions. He asks someone "How do I get to Carnegie Hall?" and the guy answers: Practice, Practice, Practice.

Especially for those of us who have been in practice and have been out of the academic game for a while, it is going to take a little practice to get "back in the swing" of academia and answering questions. The best way to do this is by doing many practice questions.

Its no different than having to warm up and get familiar again with your toss as you start to play tennis again.

You need to get back into knowing that they will likely want you to remember that the half life of AFP is 5-7 days and that the half life of β HCG is 1 day or that Methotrexate is excreted by the kidneys (not by the liver) or that VP-16 works through Topo II (not Topo I).

#5 HemeOncJobs.com's Question Bank and Study Guide of "Things you need to know"

Questions Bank

To help you with the need to do as many practice questions as possible, here at www.HemeOncJobs.com we will soon put together a **free "Questions Bank"** which you can just download and have fun answering. We will scour all sorts of old manuals, board reviews, old MSKPs, etc for as many old practice questions as we can find and gather them up here for you.

Like the St Louis Cardinals in the off season, the key here is to practice. You know how to do this stuff. You would not have made it through medical school if you did not know how to answer questions on a multiple choice test; it's just you just need to get back in the swing and practice of answering questions - and with this questions bank, we at HemeOncJobs.com hope to help. The more you practice - i.e. the more practice questions you do - the more limber and practiced you will be when it's time for you to take the written re-certification exam.

"Things you Need To Know" Study Guide

We will also soon put up on HemeOncJobs.com a "Things you need to know" Study Guide for re-certifying the Medical Oncology Boards. This is a list of review of things which are fairly basic to just about any Heme/Onc exam you'll take and things which you need to make sure you review before the written re-certification exam. Stuff like the tumor

types in MEN I, IIa and IIB or that Burkitt's Lymphoma is due to the 8,14 translocation.

The Study Guide is not complete and exhaustive

By no means is the HemeOncJobs.com study guide an exhaustive, comprehensive, complete compilation of everything you need to know in order to pass the re-certification exam. Heaven forbid. Our study guide is basically the study guide I made for myself when I was studying for my Medical Oncology re-certification. It worked for me and you are free to use my study guide as your launch pad to make your own study guide for your re-certification exam. Around here at HemeOncJobs.com we call the study guide Dr. Wesley's study guide (yes, I know, we are SO creative with our names around here).

Just as Microsoft Windows keeps sending us updates, as we think of new things to add to our study guide - or get more input from colleagues - we will keep updating and improving our Dr. Wesley's Study Guide. We may even E Mail these updates to anyone who wants them and signs up for them.

Help us improve Dr. Wesley's Study Guide

If others out there wish to send me an E Mail with things we should add to Dr. Wesley's Study Guide in order to improve it, please do so. We at HemeOncJobs.com would be ever so thankful to you for doing so and your colleagues - who are the ones who will benefit from your suggestions/additions to the Study Guide - will be thankful as well. Please send your contributions to the E Mail address below my name below.

#6 Summary

Well that's it. That wasn't so bad was it? The whole re-certification thing, once you understand it and know the strategy you will use to approach it, is not that bad.

6 Summary (Cont'd)

In a nutshell, the key to **re-certifying painlessly** is to do the following:

- #1. Start early.** Start as soon as you're eligible to start.
Start a couple of years before your certificate expires.
- #2. Do your Practice Improvement Module (PIM) simultaneously** along with the questions groups you are doing.
Yes, the questions are more fun, but the PIM needs to be done.
- #3. Do as many Practice Questions** as you can find - especially if you have been out in practice for a while and are rusty about the whole "answering questions" sort of thing.
- #4. Have as much fun as possible** with the whole thing. It can actually be fun to do this whole thing if you start early, keep the right attitude and approach it as a learning exercise. Good luck.
- #5. If anyone has any questions for us, please feel free to send us an E mail to the E Mail address under my name below.**

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