

WHITE PAPER



WOUND CARE CERTIFICATION

THE IMPORTANCE OF FORMAL ACCREDITED
CERTIFICATION IN WOUND CARE

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I. Introduction

As average life expectancy increases, conditions associated with wound management are becoming more prevalent in our society. The rise of diseases such as diabetes and peripheral arterial disease is leading to an increase in the number of chronic wound sufferers, resulting in a greater need for qualified individuals who can effectively treat these patients and improve their long-term prognosis.¹

Wound care certification is a way that patients and facilities can be reassured that appropriately qualified clinicians are caring for them. Unfortunately, certification bodies are subject to few, if any, legal restrictions from state or federal agencies, and almost any organization can claim to be a credentialing association.⁹ Accreditation can help lessen the confusion.

With the advent of the Internet, unaccredited wound care certifications and wound care certificate pathways are on the rise, causing confusion and a lack of standardization within the industry. This is further compounded by organizations promoting certifications that offer the same certification exam and credentials, irrespective of the applicant's level of education or expertise.

This paper discusses the currently available wound care certifications, the importance of choosing an accredited wound care certification program, and the benefits of accredited wound care certification.

II. Malpractice Lawsuits Due to Improper Wound Care

Wound care is concerned with the treatment of acute and chronic wounds, such as pressure ulcers, diabetic ulcers, venous ulcers, and arterial insufficiency ulcers. Individuals who are not properly trained in evidence-based wound management are often unable to identify the sometimes subtle differences between similar-looking wounds that may require substantially different treatments. Such mistakes can cause a delay in wound healing, possible amputation, and even death. In addition, these mistakes can also cost facilities greatly. For example, allegations around skin and wound management are the second-leading cause of litigation in nursing homes.²

Another issue of concern is that individuals who are not properly trained in wound care may not understand the necessary wound-related documentation required for patients during their treatment. As a result of incorrect documentation, lawsuits are often filed against the facility due to the *appearance* of incompetence, even if appropriate procedures were followed.^{4,5}

The presence of a certified wound care professional on staff not only greatly improves patient safety and patient outcomes⁶ but may also reduce the risk of litigation.

III. Education and Training of Wound Care Professionals

Currently, there is no uniform system in place to gauge the knowledge and training of health-care professionals in wound care. In addition, wound care certificate programs and nonaccredited wound care certification programs are on the rise. The lack of standardization for levels of education and certification within the wound care specialty is an important issue affecting both patients and facilities. Therefore, it is vital that health-care professionals and facilities carefully research the programs of study and wound care certifications available before deciding which path to choose.

IV. Accreditation of Wound Care Certification Programs

Accreditation is a means of validating and authenticating a certification program, and it provides reassurance that the educational and assessment process involved is rigorous, valid, and in-line with industry standards.^{8,9} Accreditation is an assertion of quality and gives a ready means of identifying excellence in training, knowledge, and expertise.

Accreditation of wound care certification programs provides impartial, third-party validation that the program has met recognized national and international credentialing industry standards for development, implementation, and maintenance of certification programs.

Accredited wound care certification assures patients, colleagues, and payers that the health-care professional has achieved excellence in the field and that he or she agrees to engage in lifelong learning. It implies allegiance to best practices, leadership, safety, and achievement of superior patient outcomes.⁶

Accreditation demonstrates that the credentials given by the certifying program are based on valid and reliable testing. —Lisa Q. Corbett, Advances in Wound Care⁶

It is essential, therefore, that persons interested in pursuing certification in wound care investigate whether the credentialing program is accredited, and if so, by whom.

Certifying programs may earn accreditation only after extensive review by an external, independent

accrediting body. Importantly, in order to qualify for accreditation, the certification exam must be independent of a specific class, course, or other educational training program and also be independent of any provider of classes, courses, or programs. Indeed, to maintain accreditation, it is essential that the certification program remain truly independent of any educational program offering training to sit for the certification test, so as to not appear biased that a specific program is recommended to pass the test.¹³ Additionally, according to the National Commission for Certifying Agencies (NCCA), a certification body should not recommend specific course work solely to pass the examination; instead, the certification body should list all available courses for exam preparation.¹⁴ The Accreditation Board for Specialty Nursing Certification (ABSNC) has similar criteria:¹⁵

Eligibility criteria should be based on a series of variables indicative of knowledge, skills, and abilities required for specialty practice and which are expected to enhance safe and effective practice. These variables may include education, experience, prerequisite credentials, references, and performance on an objective examination. Each variable in the eligibility criteria is defined by the certifying organization, the profession, and other stakeholders.²⁷

The certifying organization must be sufficiently independent from the specialty membership association to ensure integrity of the certification process, maintain clear lines of accountability, and prevent undue influence on the part of vested interests.²⁷

There are two major accrediting agencies for the formal certification of wound care:^{8,9}

- National Commission for Certifying Agencies (NCCA).
- Accreditation Board for Specialty Nursing Certification (ABSNC).

NCCA Accreditation¹¹

The NCCA's Standards for the Accreditation of Certification Programs were initially created in the mid-1970s and were the first standards developed by the credentialing industry for professional certification programs. The NCCA Standards were developed to help ensure the health, welfare, and safety of the public. They highlight the essential elements of a high-quality program.

NCCA accredited programs certify individuals in a wide range of professions and occupations, including health-care professionals, automotive professionals, counselors, emergency technicians, crane operators,

and more. To date, NCCA has accredited approximately 330 programs from more than 130 organizations.

The NCCA has set forth a stringent and comprehensive set of criteria to evaluate certification programs.

For detailed information about the NCCA accreditation standards, visit

<http://www.credentialingexcellence.org>.

ABSNC Accreditation¹⁰

The ABSNC is an autonomous, independent board with authority for all accreditation decisions and functions. ABSNC accreditation is earned through a 1/5 peer-review process that allows nursing certification programs to demonstrate compliance with the highest-quality national standards in the industry. The ABSNC is the only accrediting body specifically for nursing certification. More than 61% of nursing certification programs are accredited by ABSNC through a rigorous peer-review process.

ABSNC accredits a nursing certification organization's entire program, including examination development and administration and the recertification processes.

For detailed information about the ABSNC accreditation standards, visit

<http://www.nursingcertification.org/accreditation/> and <http://www.credentialingexcellence.org>.

V. Current Accredited Wound Care Certification Programs

Accredited wound care certification requires the candidate to have prior wound care experience. Two organizations currently offer formally recognized accredited certifications in wound care:

- The American Board of Wound Management (ABWM)
- National Alliance of Wound Care and Ostomy (NAWCO)
- The Wound Ostomy Continence Nursing Certification Board (WOCNCB)

The American Board of Wound Management (ABWM) sets the following requirements for individuals wanting to take the certification examination:⁷

- A health-care professional with at least three years of professional experience related to wound management is eligible to sit for one of the following ABWM wound care certification examinations:
 - Certified Wound Care Associate (CWCA). Candidates must hold a full and unrestricted

professional license in at least one state and in all states in which they currently practice.

- Certified Wound Specialist (CWS). Candidates must have at least a bachelor’s degree and hold a full and unrestricted professional license in at least one state and in all states in which they currently practice.
- Certified Wound Specialist Physician (CWSP). Candidates must have one of the following licenses: MD, Doctor of Osteopathic Medicine (DO), or Doctor of Podiatric Medicine (DPM). They must also hold a full and unrestricted professional license in at least one state and in all states in which they practice.

The National Alliance of Wound Care and Ostomy (NAWCO) sets the following requirements for individuals wanting to take the WCC certification examination:

#1 Eligible Licenses	All Candidates
Active unrestricted license: RN, LPN/LVN, NP, PA, PT, PTA, OT, OTA, MD, DO, DPM	✓

#2 Eligibility Requirements: (Candidates must meet 1 Education Requirement and 1 Experience Requirement)	
Education: (Must meet 1 of the options listed below)	All Candidates
Option A: Graduation from a skin and wound management education course that meets certification committee criteria	✓
OR	OR
Option B: Current active CWCN, CWON, CWOCN (from the Wound Ostomy Continence Nursing Certification Board (WOCNCB), or CWS certification (from the American Board of Wound Management (ABWM)	✓
AND	
Experience*: (Must meet 1 of the options listed below)	All Candidates
Option A: Have completed 120 hours of hands-on clinical training with approved NAWCO preceptor	✓
OR	OR
Option B: Have completed two (2) years full-time or four (4) years part-time experience in an approved profession with ongoing, active involvement in the care of wound care patients or in management, education, or research directly related to wound care	✓

**EXPERIENCE: Full-time is considered 40 hours per week. Part-time is considered less than 40 hours per week.*

The AWCC - Advanced Wound Care Certification

The National Alliance of Wound Care and Ostomy (NAWCO) also created a new certification in September 2019 - the Advanced Wound Care Certification (AWCC). **While the WCC is accredited, the AWCC is not-likely due to how new the certification is.** The requirements for AWCC certification include having become previously certified with another wound care certification - including the WCC, CWCA, CWS, CWSP, or CWCN, CWON, or CWOCN.

#1 Eligible Licenses	Necessary for all Candidates
Active unrestricted license/certificate: RN, LPN/LVN, NP, APN, PT, PTA, OT, OTA, DPM, DO, MD, PA	✓
Current active certification with National Alliance of Wound Care and Ostomy (NAWCO®) as a "WCC®", Wound Ostomy Continence Nursing Certification Board (WOCNCB®) as a "CWCN®", "CWON®" or "CWOCN®" or current active certification with American Board of Wound Management (ABWM®) as a "CWS®" "CWCA®" or "CWSP®"	✓
Submission of Certification Application	✓

#2 Eligibility Requirements <i>(Candidates must meet both the Education Requirement and Experience Requirement)</i>	Necessary for all Candidates
Education: Graduation of advanced wound training course	✓
AND	
Experience: 1 year of full-time or 2 years of part time experience in an approved profession with ongoing, active involvement in the care of wound care patients or in wound management, education, or research directly related to advanced wound care	✓

#3 Additional Requirements	Necessary for all Applicants
Applicants must agree to adhere to the NAWCO® Code of Ethics	✓
Completion of application and required supporting documentation	✓
Full payment of required fees	✓
Passing score on AWCC™ certification exam	✓

The Wound Ostomy Continence Nursing Board (WOCNCB) sets the following requirements for individuals wanting to take the certification examination:²⁶

1. Have a current RN License.
2. Hold a bachelor's (or higher) degree; all baccalaureate degrees are applicable.
3. Have completed ONE of the following pathways of education or practice:
 - A. Traditional Pathway
 - Graduate from an accredited WOC Nursing Education Program.
 - The WOC (ET) Nursing Education Program must have been completed within the past five years (from date of exam application); otherwise, you must prove eligibility via the Experiential Pathway.
 - The WOC (ET) Nursing Education Program must be accredited by the WOCN® Society at the time of graduation.
 - B. Experiential Pathway
 - The accumulation of direct patient clinical hours and continuing education credits (contact hours) must be earned post-bachelor's degree while practicing as an RN.
 - 50 CE/CME credits (contact hours) or an equivalent in college course work must be completed over the five years previous to the date of application. All CE/CME credits (contact hours) or college course work must directly apply to the specialty of wound care.
 - 1,500 direct patient clinical hours must be completed within the previous five years. Furthermore, 375 hours must have occurred within the year prior to application.

Providing evidence of a level of expertise by way of a valid accredited certification board is an important way to raise standards and to ultimately improve the quality of care that patients need and deserve.

VI. Nonaccredited Wound Care Certification Programs and Certificate of Completion Courses

Wound care certification and certificate services offered by other organizations may be nonaccredited certifications or merely certificates of completion, which can be mistaken for an accredited wound care certification. Example:

- VOHRA Wound Physicians
- CMET

VII. Distinctions Between Accredited Certifications and a Certificate of Attendance

The key distinctions between an accredited certification and a certificate of attendance is defined by the Institute for Credentialing Excellence, as follows:¹³

Certificates of attendance or participation are provided to individuals who have attended or participated in classes, courses, or other educational training programs. The certificate awarded at the completion of the program or event signifies that the participant was present and, in some cases, that the participant actively participated in the program or event. Participants' demonstration of accomplishment of the intended learning outcomes is not a requirement for receiving the certificate; thus, possession of a certificate of attendance or participation does not indicate that the participant has accomplished the intended learning outcomes.¹³

In contrast, ***professional or personal certification*** is a voluntary process by which individuals are evaluated against predetermined standards for knowledge, skills, or competencies. Participants who demonstrate that they meet the standards by successfully completing the assessment process are granted a time-limited credential. Furthermore, in order to retain the credential, certified professionals must maintain continued competence. The credential awarded by the certification program provider denotes that the participant possesses particular knowledge, skills, or competencies.¹³

In general terms, the differences between certification and a certificate can be summarized as follows:¹⁶

Certification	Certificate
Results from an assessment process	Results from an educational process
Typically requires some amount of professional experience	For both entry-level and experienced professionals
Awarded by a third-party, standard-setting organization	Awarded by an educational program or institution
Indicates mastery/competency as measured against a defensible set of standards, usually by application or exam	Indicates completion of a course or series of courses with a specific focus; is different from a degree-granting program
Standards set through a defensible, industry-wide process (job analysis) that results in an outline of required knowledge and skills	Course content determined in a variety of ways (e.g., by a faculty committee or workshop leader)
Typically confers a designation to use after one's name	Usually listed on a resume detailing education; may issue a paper certificate
Requires ongoing maintenance; holder must demonstrate he/she continues to meet requirements	Is a final result; demonstrates knowledge of course content at the end of a set period in time

Unfortunately, the existence of unaccredited wound care certifications and wound care certificate pathways causes confusion and a lack of standardization within the industry. This is further compounded by organizations promoting certifications that offer the same certification exam and credentials, irrespective of the applicant's level of education or expertise. An organization that grants one certification exam and credential, while not differentiating certifications by academic level and professional license, creates a liability for health-care organizations and promotes a dangerous situation for patients.

It should be noted that both the ABWM and the WOCNCB accredited wound care certifications differentiate educational levels, while other organizations that offer nonaccredited certifications and certificates of completion present the same testing level for each test, whether the individual is a licensed practical nurse (LPN), registered nurse (RN), Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN), or medical doctor (MD).

VIII. Opportunities for Health Professionals with Accredited Certification

In addition to raising standards in wound care and improving the lives of patients, accredited certification offers tangible benefits to the certified professionals themselves, in terms of both enhanced peer-group respect and career prospects. Over 90% of the 11,000 certified and noncertified nurses surveyed by the ABNS stated that achieving and maintaining accredited certification validates the holder's specialized knowledge and ability, enhances professional credibility, and indicates a level of clinical competence among peer workers.¹⁷ Furthermore, over 80% agreed that certification promotes recognition from peers and other health professionals.¹⁷

Some of the many areas of opportunity provided by accredited certification are described below:^{11,17,18}

Raising standards: Demand for skilled and knowledgeable wound care professionals has never been greater. The act of studying for accredited certification exams has a dramatic effect on the student's knowledge and understanding which, when combined with the skills practiced every day in the clinical setting, makes for a formidable combination of expertise and experience. Because accredited certification requires a demonstration of continued competency, it is incumbent on the health-care professional to remain informed of any developments in their specialties. Therefore, as well as being greatly in demand, certified professionals are also raising standards in wound care and driving the discipline forward.

Opening doors: Eighty-six percent of nurse managers questioned in a survey confirmed that if they were presented with two similarly experienced nurses, they would always hire the certified nurse over the noncertified equivalent.¹⁷ Their proven knowledge base and greater professional commitment to lifelong learning were the most common reasons cited.

Enhancing professional standing: Accredited certification increases the health-care professional's influence, leading to invitations to participate at the highest level in expert panels, development programs, and other influential forums. The accredited certified wound care professional is likely to enjoy greater opportunities to network and engage with other professionals, both nationally and internationally.

Achieving personal fulfillment: In the ABNS survey of certified and noncertified nurses described earlier, 97% of nurses stated that certification provides personal satisfaction, and 88% agreed that certification

enhances personal confidence in clinical abilities.¹⁷

Enjoying the rewards: Besides the benefits in terms of professional standing and greater professional recognition, the simple truth is that accredited certification often equates with higher pay. In a 2006 salary survey of more than 1,100 nurses, those who reported being certified in a specialty earned \$9,200 more annually than nurses who were not certified.¹⁹

Comparison of annual salary for certified nurses versus noncertified¹⁹



IX. Benefits of Accredited Wound Care Professionals to Medical Facilities

Recognition of the devastating effect that chronic wounds may have on a person’s prognosis and quality of life has led to the inclusion of wound management issues at the heart of government regulations for long-term care, home care, and acute care.⁹ Including an accredited, certified wound care professional on the staff of a long-term care facility greatly reduces the risk of litigation.

As well as mitigating the threat of litigation, the presence of an accredited, certified wound care professional within a medical facility can also reduce the costs associated with wound management.

When the Montefiore Home Health Agency in New York implemented the hiring and training of wound care by accredited wound care professionals, patient costs for wound care problems dropped significantly. Within eight months of the program’s launch, the percentage of patients requiring daily visits dropped from 52% to 20%, resulting in significant cost savings.²⁰ This study also showed the following:

- The percentage of non-healing wounds (not healed 12 weeks after admission) decreased from 33% to 20%.
- In 2013, post-surgery healing rates reached 95% compared with an average of 88% in New York State and 89% nationally. In 2008, before the implementation of the home-care wound program, the hospital's post-surgery healing rate was 86%.²⁰

The substantial costs associated with managing chronic wounds are well documented, and health-care facilities are desperate to reduce this cost burden through prevention and effective wound management. Pressure ulcers illustrate this point clearly. The prevalence of pressure ulcers is reported to be 26% among hospitalized patients, 43% among patients in nursing homes, and 39% among patients with spinal cord injuries.²¹ A 2010 retrospective analysis of patients with stage IV pressure ulcers reported an average hospital treatment cost of \$129,248 for hospital-acquired ulcers during one admission. The equivalent value for community-acquired ulcers over an average of four admissions was \$124,327. This high cost is particularly relevant because of the classification of hospital-acquired stage III and IV pressure ulcers as a “never event” that will not be reimbursed.

Halting the progression of early-stage pressure ulcers therefore avoids unnecessary pain and suffering and can reduce health-care expenditures by millions of dollars. Therefore, health-care professionals specializing in wound prevention and management have become sought-after employees in all areas of patient care, and wound care is becoming recognized as a specialty area of practice.²²

X. Benefits of Accredited Wound Care Professionals to Patients

Of all the benefits of accredited certification in wound care, the most important is the benefit to the very patients who are served by wound care professionals. One analysis of 652 nonfederal hospitals reported that a 10% increase in baccalaureate staff nurses decreased 30-day mortality by 6%, and by 2% in the case of certified baccalaureate nurses.²³ Furthermore, nurses who are certified in wound care have been shown to have greater nursing knowledge. In one study, a convenience sample of 460 nurses were asked to complete a standardized pressure ulcer knowledge test. Nurses certified in wound care were reported to score 89% on the test, compared with 78% for nurses certified in other specialties. Nurses with no certification scored the lowest, with 76.5%.²⁴

Finally, patients with selected wound-care-related conditions who were managed by nurses with an accredited certification in wound care showed a higher marked improvement when compared with patients treated by nonaccredited certified nurses:²⁵

Clinical Condition (Improvement %)	CERTIFIED Wound Care Nurse	NON-CERTIFIED Wound Care Nurse
Pressure ulcers	5.7%	5.0%
Stasis ulcers	1.8%	1.5%
Surgical wounds	36.3%	27.5%
Urinary incontinence	49.4%	43.3%
Bowel incontinence	16.4%	16.5%
Urinary tract infections	10.4%	8.2%

XI. Conclusions

There are many advantages associated with achieving accredited wound care certification. Most important are the benefits to patients, who can be confident that they are receiving the best possible care from a provider with current knowledge in the area of wound management. A certified professional will benefit from greater career opportunities, greater respect among colleagues, and a level of personal fulfillment. Finally, medical facilities employing certified wound care professionals also benefit from this qualification, as they are more likely to achieve optimal patient outcomes, are less likely to be subject to litigation, and may reduce their costs of treating wounds through more effective management.

Because of the growing interest in wound certification, many organizations have seized the opportunity to offer programs that they claim lead to accredited wound care certification. However, it is essential to recognize that not all wound certifications are the same. Many wound care certifications fall well below industry standards, involve no rigorous testing, are not externally audited, and are not accredited. The rise of nonaccredited certifications in wound care creates confusion in the industry and a false sense of security due to the lack of differentiation between educational level and professional license, ultimately endangering patients and facilities. Achieving certification in a particular area of expertise is a worthwhile and noble pursuit, with tangible benefits for patients, employers, and the professionals themselves. However, before embarking on a certification program, it is worth taking the time to research the

available options. The certification exam preparation course should be rigorous and commensurate with the learner's level of education and academic degree, and it should prepare the individual for an accredited certification. The benefits of such a program and certification would ensure that the individual's credentials meet industry standards and carry the prestige of a formal accredited certification.

Glossary of Terms

ABNS	American Board of Nursing Specialties
ABSNC	Accreditation Board for Specialty Nursing Certification
ABWM	American Board of Wound Management
ADRN	Associate Degree Registered Nurse
APRN	Advanced Practice Registered Nurse
AWCC	Advanced Wound Care Certification
BSN	Bachelor of Science in Nursing
CWCA	Certified Wound Care Associate
CWCN	Certified Wound Care Nurse
CWON	Certified Wound Ostomy Nurse
CWOCN	Certified Wound Ostomy Continence Nurse
CWS	Certified Wound Specialist
CWSP	Certified Wound Specialist Physician
CE	Continuing Education
DO	Doctor of Osteopathic Medicine
DPM	Doctor of Podiatric Medicine
ICE	Institute for Credentialing Excellence
LPN	Licensed Practical Nurse
MD	Medical Doctor
NCCA	National Commission for Certifying Agencies Registered Nurse
RN	Registered Nurse
WOCNB	Wound, Ostomy and Continence Nursing Certification Board

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