



UNDERSEA & HYPERBARIC MEDICINE

Clinical privilege white paper

Background

Undersea and hyperbaric medicine is a unique subspecialty of emergency medicine that involves the therapeutic use of oxygen under pressure to treat disease. The Undersea and Hyperbaric Medical Society (UHMS) defines hyperbaric oxygen treatment as an intervention in which an individual breathes near-100% oxygen while inside a hyperbaric chamber that is pressurized to greater than sea-level pressure.

Hyperbaric oxygen is used to treat diving emergencies, arterial gas emboli, radiation injuries, complex wounds, carbon monoxide poisoning, deadly infections, ocular emergencies, and much more. The specialty of undersea and hyperbaric medicine includes treatment with hyperbaric oxygen but also the study of extreme environments, immersion effects, and marine life injuries.

In coastal regions, hyperbaric oxygen therapy (HBO₂ or occasionally, HBOT) is more frequently used to treat divers; however, HBO₂ is becoming primarily used inland to treat non-healing wounds typically caused by diabetes. Increases in diabetes and non-healing wounds have significantly expanded hospitals' use of HBO₂ in recent years. The increased demand has created a shortage of qualified providers to administer and supervise HBO₂. Organizations like the UHMS have worked to create additional education and guidelines for physicians who may be providing HBO₂ in a hospital setting but are not board-certified in undersea and hyperbaric medicine.

Prior to 2010, the American College of Graduate Medical Education (ACGME) through the American Board of Preventive Medicine (ABPM) and American Board of Emergency Medicine (ABEM) offered a practice track option for subspecialty board eligibility. As of 2013, the practice track option closed, and board certification for allopathic physicians through the emergency medicine or preventive medicine boards now requires a one-year fellowship.

Because of the definitive closure of the practice pathway qualification option for board certification eligibility, the UHMS created an alternative educational program for both physicians and advanced practice providers (APP).

Involved specialties

Undersea and hyperbaric medicine, emergency medicine, preventive medicine, family medicine, internal medicine, podiatric medicine

Positions of specialty boards

ABEM

The American Board of Emergency Medicine (ABEM) offers subspecialty certification in undersea and hyperbaric medicine to physicians who meet the eligibility criteria, fulfill credential requirements, and pass the Undersea and Hyperbaric Medicine Certification Examination.

Emergency physicians seeking to take the certification examination in undersea and hyperbaric medicine must:

- Be certified by ABEM or the American Osteopathic Board of Emergency Medicine (AOBEM)
- Successfully complete an ACGME-accredited undersea and hyperbaric medicine fellowship of at least [two years as specified in the eligibility criteria](#)
- Complete and submit the application to ABEM
- Actively participate in the ABEM Maintenance of Certification Program or the AOBEM Osteopathic Continuous Certification Program
- Fulfill the ABEM Policy on Medical Licensure
- Comply with the [ABEM Policy on Board Eligibility for Subspecialty Certification](#)

ABPM

The American Board of Preventive Medicine (ABPM) offers subspecialty certification in undersea and hyperbaric medicine. The scope of the subspecialty emphasizes the occupational, environmental, safety, and clinical aspects of diving, hyperbaric chamber operations, compressed air work, and HBO₂.

General requirements:

- **Medical license:** An unrestricted and currently valid license to practice medicine in a state, the District of Columbia, a territory, a commonwealth, or a possession of the United States or in a province of Canada is required. If the applicant has licenses in multiple states, no license may be restricted, revoked, or suspended or be currently under such notice.
- **Medical degree:** Graduation from a medical school in the United States that at the time of the applicant's graduation was accredited by the Liaison Committee on Medical Education, a school of osteopathic medicine approved by the American Osteopathic Association (AOA), an accredited medical school in Canada, or from a medical school located outside the United States and Canada that is deemed satisfactory to the Board is required.
- **American Board of Medical Specialties (ABMS) member board certification:** Primary board certification is a core requirement. Some ABMS boards accept subspecialty certification as meeting the primary certification requirements. In those cases, the individual would be listed as certified in the primary specialty. The status of primary certification is determined by each individual board.