Hippocrates and Certification

*Reprinted with permission from the Society of Nuclear Medicine from J Nucl Med
March 1, 2012 vol. 53 no.3 13N
Harvey A. Ziessman, M.D., Newsline Editor SNM*

The Hippocratic tradition in medicine is strong. Put the patient first and do no harm. This is what we expect of ourselves and what patients and the public expect of us. When we forget this, we do damage to the practice of medicine and to the confidence patients have in us.

Physicians have a special place in society. They are generally held in high esteem and rewarded accordingly. Doing damage to the trust that patients and society have in us has consequences. Physician certification and continuing competence have increasingly been put under scrutiny by the public. Maintenance of certification has been our response. That is, it is not enough to pass a certification exam at the completion of specialty training, but one must now demonstrate learning and competency over a lifetime of practice.

That is why it is a particular embarrassment and blemish not only to a specialty but to medicine in general when it is nationally reported that the questions on a specialty certification exam are known ahead of time by the exam takers, that questions are passed down each year to candidates planning to take the exam, and that most questions are unchanged from year to year. This sends the wrong message and teaches the wrong values to trainees. It is particularly upsetting when the voices and leaders of the specialty play a game of ostrich with the public and pretend to be shocked at and unaware of these practices. Fortunately, what has happened recently to the American Board of Internal Medicine and the American Board of Radiology cannot happen to the American Board of Nuclear Medicine (ABNM). To its credit, the ABNM has always been conscious of the importance of exam security. The board goes to great lengths to maintain the security of its licensing exams. Medicine must police itself or others will do it for us. More important, it is the right thing to do.