Introduction

Following formal training and licensure, a majority of optometric physicians will enter private practice or join an existing practice as an associate. Today, many practitioners are also electing to join a multispecialty group, a larger clinic or healthcare entity such as the Veterans Administration, the Indian or Public Health Service, an HMO or a PPO. In addition to state licensure, these practitioners may encounter yet another industry-wide aspect of verification of competency and skill: the institutional credentialing committee. Surgical or procedural credentialing, in Optometry as in most other healthcare disciplines, is an ongoing, formal, post-licensure process that employs a common set of guidelines to protect the public and ensure that the patient receives a level of service consistent with recognized standards of care. The credentialing process also serves to shield the institution from liability as well as to inform the patient that he or she is being treated by an optometric physician whose qualifications, training, experience, and ability to practice optometric surgery are acceptable and held to a uniform professional standard.

Credentialing and Privileging in Healthcare

Professional Optometry, along with all healthcare professions, has the duty of safeguarding the public and ensuring the delivery of an acceptable standard of care. Healthcare establishments, especially those whose providers are subject to vicarious liability claims due to the acts of others, typically have institutional bylaws that identify the required minimum credentialing and privileging requirements to substantiate the competency of their providers. As Optometry continues to expand into a more comprehensive scope of practice, the optometric physician must be prepared to participate in the industry-wide credentialing and privileging process to which all other healthcare practitioners adhere.

What is Credentialing?

Credentialing is a local process defined by an institution's bylaws that guide administrative processes to ensure that their staff, whether directly employed or not, provide competent and safe care. Practicing optometry, medicine, and surgery in an institutional or group setting is a privilege, and it begins with being credentialed to be an active part of the staff. Once the individual is credentialled to practice in the particular hospital, clinic, or other healthcare setting, the next step is to define the privileges of practice, which depend on a thorough evaluation of the practitioner’s clinical qualifications, training, references, and historical performance.

Who Requires Credentialing?

In general, any licensed, independent healthcare professional, optometric physician included, who has been permitted by law and regulated by a licensing body to provide services without supervision that are within the scope of that individual’s license will likely need to be credentialed and privileged to practice within an establishment where other providers, employers, partners, staff or colleagues may incur vicarious liability due to the acts of that practitioner. While every state has laws regulating medical or optometric practice, simply having a license does not mean one can do anything they want. Credentialing is the process by which the practitioner’s qualifications are verified by the particular group or institution where the practitioner intends to provide care. Privileging is the process whereby a practitioner is authorized to perform a specific set of services or procedures based on an evaluation of
the individual’s credentials, performance, experience, competence, and recommendation by the institution's credentialing committee.

Agencies that Assist in Verification of an Optometric Physician’s Credentials

In addition to personal references and recommendations by current or past employers, several agencies and organizations may be queried to check the primary sources for verification of credentials. For optometric physicians, these may include schools or colleges attended, residency or continuing education programs completed, state licensing boards, the National Board of Examiners in Optometry (eg., the NBEO Laser & Surgical Procedures Exam), the Office of Inspector General (OIG), and the National Practitioner Data Bank (NPDB). The NPDB, in particular, is a federal government program that compiles practitioner data and provides it to authorized users of the database. The data collected includes negative complaints, malpractice suits, and awards, loss of privileges, loss of professional society membership, suspension, or revocation of a license, or exclusion from participation in federal programs such as Medicaid or Medicare.

The Credentialing Process

Healthcare entities typically use a 2-step credentialing process. An initial screening is used to ensure that the practitioner applicant has met with the basic qualifications and is not disqualified for reasons such as:

1. Does the individual have a current and unrestricted license to practice their profession?
2. Are there any disciplinary actions or sanctions past or pending by licensing boards, government, or professional organizations?
3. Is there a criminal history?
4. Is there an unusual history of malpractice claims?
5. Is there any significant health history which would prevent the individual from discharging their duties as a healthcare provider?

Once the initial screen has been completed, and the practitioner met the minimum requirements for credentialing, then the formal application is completed. The following are usually verified and considered:

1. The applicant’s formal credentials such as diplomas, case logs, references, professional licenses, results of board examinations, board certifications, and membership and good standing in professional societies.
2. The applicant must agree to provide continuous care to patients at an acceptable standard of care.
3. The applicant should acknowledge receipt of and agree to abide by the healthcare entities bylaws, regulations, rules and Code of Conduct as applicable.
4. The applicant should be expected to provide complete information about health status and vaccination.
5. The applicant must submit to a mental and or physical exam (including random drug testing) as required by the institution for cause. Failure to comply may result in termination or suspension of privileges without a right to a hearing.
ASOS President Richard E. Castillo, OD, OD Provides Prospective on Procedural Credentialing for Optometric Physicians

The applicant must certify that all evidence, information, and diplomas are valid and complete. Any intentional misstatements or omissions may be grounds for immediate termination of privileges or revocation of the application.

Privileging

All healthcare entities are responsible for conducting due diligence to ensure that their providers are competent via a bona fide credentialing and vetting process. Once the credentialing process is over, the committee must consider granting the privileges requested by the provider. Privileging may include allowing the practitioner to work with full privileges, limited privileges or may result in denied privileges. Typically, the practitioner will request a specific set of privileges (services or procedures they wish to perform at the institution), which will then be reviewed and either approved, conditionally approved, or denied by the credentialing committee.

Credentialing committees will only grant privileges specific to the practitioner’s qualifications and experience. For example, regardless of licensure and scope of practice, an optometric physician who joins a multi-specialty group may not be allowed to repair an eyelid laceration without verifiable training or experience. The credentialing committee must take into account the potential risks to patients as well as the potential liabilities which may be incurred by the institution when generating privileges for newly credentialed practitioners.

Summary

Credentialing and Privileging are post-licensure institutional processes conducted by a healthcare entity or facility where an individual practitioner seeks to provide services. Particularly important for practitioners seeking to provide surgical or procedural care, the process verifies the individual's qualifications, knowledge, and physical skillset before permitting that individual to render services under the roof of a particular healthcare establishment or entity. Optometric physicians should be prepared to navigate the institutional credentialing process as they continue to expand their scope of services and integrate into the broader healthcare infrastructure.