

ACHD Subspecialty Certification – FAQ

What is the ACHD subspecialty certification proposal?

To become a cardiologist or other medical specialist, there are specific training requirements and a special test you must pass. Some doctors choose to specialize further and become a subspecialist. To do so, you must first get certified in your specialty, then complete additional training and pass a subspecialty exam. Right now there is no official training pathway for those interested in the care of adults with congenital heart disease. We are asking the appropriate boards to create a training pathway and exam to make ACHD cardiology an official subspecialty in cardiology.

Why are the NCHC and ACC working to create ACHD subspecialty certification?

The transformation of complex congenital heart disease from a fatal to a life-long disease means that we currently face a grave shortage of cardiologists qualified to care for adults with these conditions. “Regular” adult cardiology training offers little training in the wide array of anatomies, interventions, and treatment options in complex congenital heart disease. ACC/AHA guidelines state that ACHD patients with more complex repaired and unrepaired CHD should have their care overseen by ACHD specialists. Right now there are no rules about who is or is not an “ACHD specialist”. Because of this, patients and families often struggle to find quality ACHD care.

Can’t CHD patients just keep seeing their pediatric cardiologists their whole lives?

Many patients do continue to see their pediatric cardiology team into young adulthood. But if they move for work or school they will need to choose a new heart care team. As they age, they may develop new adult health issues, like pregnancy or adult-onset diabetes. Adults with CHD can also develop different heart issues than those seen in children, and may require different kinds of interventions. Some patients may prefer to switch to a care setting that is oriented to their adult needs. For some, choosing their own heart care team can be a key step in taking charge of their own heart health. ACHD specialty care is for patients who “outgrow” pediatric cardiology care.

Aren’t there already ACHD programs available in the US?

Yes. Currently there are over 80 cardiology programs in the United States that offer ACHD care. You can see extensive information on these centers, including director’s training, at the ACHD program directory at www.achaheart.org . Those

describing themselves as ACHD specialists currently report a variety of training pathways.

What kind of training is proposed for ACHD subspecialists?

The current proposal requires those seeking ACHA subspecialty certification to train in congenital cardiology and adult cardiology issues, as well as aspects of adult medicine pertinent to the ACHD patient. To become certified, the candidate would complete the training, demonstrate competency, and pass a subspecialty exam.

Does the plan allow both pediatric and adult cardiologists to become ACHD subspecialists?

Yes. The plan proposes two pathways for training- one for pediatric cardiologists and one for adult (internal medicine) cardiologists. Pediatric cardiologists would receive more training in adult issues. Adult cardiologists would receive more training in congenital heart issues. All trainees would be required to pass the same test designed to assess overall ACHD care competence.

Is there a provision for “grandfathering in” cardiologists currently caring for ACHD patients?

Yes. The proposal recommends that providers who trained previously be able to waive the training requirement if they can document that their past training and experience fulfills the requirements of ACHD training. They still would be required to take and pass the ACHD subspecialty exam to become an official ACHD subspecialist.

Would ACHD accreditation mean that ACHD patients could only be seen by certified ACHD subspecialists?

No. Patients would still be free to choose the kind of cardiology care they desire. Cardiologists would still be free to treat all kinds of heart patients. Patients desiring ACHD subspecialty care could ask about subspecialty certification when seeking care. Providers typically display these kinds of certifications and list this information publicly.