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June 15, 2020

ABR Board of Governors

Via email

Dear ABR Board of Governors,

The Association of Program Directors in Radiology (APDR) emphatically believes that a fixed date for the next administration of the American Board of Radiology (ABR) qualifying (“Core”) examination is critical to the educational and clinical missions of our training programs, and to the wellbeing of our residents. We support the ABR’s commitment to the virtual Core examination made at the APDR Roundtable on June 10, 2020 and call on the ABR to partner with the wider radiology community to implement it no later than June 2021.

The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly disrupted radiology residencies, from redeployment of trainees to the frontlines to drastic reduction in imaging and cancellation of lectures and conferences. The pandemic came at a particularly bad time for our third-year residents, just weeks before the scheduled Core examination in June 2020. Its subsequent postponement to November 2020 was yet another disruption in the residents’ personal and professional lives directly attributed to Covid-19. Program directors and residents rose to the occasion to change work and study schedules, as they have done throughout this difficult time. However, with so much of our profession’s clinical and academic activity taking place remotely due to the need for social distancing to prevent illness, program directors and residents had hoped that the ABR could deliver the Core exam in local testing centers across the US or have it proctored directly in radiology departments.

The ABR’s decision to postpone the Core exam for a second time, this time to February 2021, while keeping the in-person format requiring air travel and large gatherings further alarmed program directors and residents. Given the high probability of continuing pandemic conditions and the low probability of widely available vaccine by early 2021, the new exam date seemed aspirational rather than certain. Moreover, the continued requirement for exam-related travel could endanger residents’ health and come into conflict with local institutional policies.

During their presentation at the APDR Roundtable on June 10, 2020 the ABR explained the challenges to remote testing by the nature of the exam, which is designed to simulate the clinical environment of radiology practice. Existing testing centers around the country lack the specialty equipment capable of displaying high resolution images, scrolling through large datasets and handling multi-step cases. APDR recognizes that the ABR’s decision to postpone the Core exam stems from a commitment to the highest validity, reliability and security of their examinations,

and we commend this commitment. At the same time, the decision to postpone the Core exam to another uncertain date imposes additional hardships on our training programs and residents. Repeated disruptions in academic and clinical schedules compromise the ability of residency programs to provide service and education and ensure the emotional and physical wellbeing of their residents. The APDR is particularly concerned that smaller and non-university programs will lack the reserves needed to satisfy the clinical requirements and academic needs while also planning for staffing disruptions due to disease outbreaks. We worry that residents in programs relying heavily on away rotations for subspecialty education and residents with young families juggling work and childcare responsibilities will be disproportionately affected. As the APDR members noted during the June 10, 2020 Roundtable discussions with the ABR representatives, a firm Core exam date is critical. It will allow program directors and residents to plan their educational, patient care, and personal lives without further needless stress and disruption.

We are heartened that the ABR has recently committed to developing a virtual Core exam and to providing transparent weekly progress updates for all stakeholders. We call on the ABR to conduct urgent consultations with organizations which have expertise in virtual exam deployment to determine the earliest reasonable time that an adequate virtual exam meeting certification requirements and reliability standards can be implemented. We urge all radiology societies and organizations that have the expertise and technical resources to partner with the ABR in this endeavor. If technical challenges make it impractical to transition to virtual testing by February 2021, we urge the ABR to commit now to remote testing by June 2021. We have no doubt that with the aid of the entire radiology community, the virtual Core examination will be a success.

Sincerely,

APDR Board of Directors