



Washington State Auditor's Office

Performance Audit Description

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December 2014

Medical discipline

Program background

When patients are unsatisfied with their medical care, they can complain to the boards that regulate their health care providers. Two such bodies are the Medical Quality Assurance Commission (MQAC), which regulates physicians and physician assistants, and the Board of Osteopathic Medicine and Surgery (BOMS), which regulates osteopathic physicians and physician assistants. These agencies, whose members are primarily doctors, have the power to investigate complaints, require remedial education, and suspend and revoke licenses. Their stated purpose is to serve the public, not the professions they regulate.

Critics of medical boards, both nationwide and here in Washington, are concerned that doctors are not able to effectively regulate other doctors because they may be too sympathetic to or protective of peers. There are also concerns that the boards' high standards of proof, such as those used in Washington, make it too difficult to impose appropriate discipline or remove bad doctors from practice. However, many doctors express concern that too much emphasis is placed on discipline and not enough on fixing the wider medical environment and the many other factors that contribute to medical error.

Scope and objectives

The audit of MQAC and BOMS would evaluate whether they are adequately protecting patient safety through their disciplinary process.

The audit will involve reviewing a sample of case files and evaluating whether investigations are performed according to Department of Health standards, and checking to ensure sanctions are enforced. In addition, we will review case files and data to see if the boards are consistent in deciding which cases to investigate.

The audit will seek to answer the following questions:

- Do the Medical Quality Assurance Commission and the Board of Osteopathic Medicine and Surgery make consistent decisions about which cases to investigate?
- Do the Commission and Board conduct adequate investigations?
- Are the Commission and Board sufficiently visible and appropriately transparent?
- Do the Commission and Board conduct investigations and hearings timely?
- Do the Commission and Board enforce the sanctions they impose?

Timing

We estimate audit results will be released late in 2015.