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To cite this article: Ann Webster Bunch, Thomas Bohan & David Senn (2017) Accreditation of Forensic Specialty Certification Bodies, *Forensic Science Policy & Management: An International Journal*, 8:1-2, 22-25, DOI: [10.1080/19409044.2017.1332118](https://doi.org/10.1080/19409044.2017.1332118)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/19409044.2017.1332118>



Published online: 19 Jul 2017.



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## Accreditation of Forensic Specialty Certification Bodies

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### ABSTRACT

The National Academy of Sciences Report of 2009 cited certification and accreditation as positive goals for forensic specialty practitioners and certification boards respectively. Certification bodies, more broadly known as conformity assessment bodies (CABs), that assess conformity to standards for forensic practitioners have existed for decades. However, accreditation bodies that assess CAB competence, other than for specialties in the medical profession, have only recently been available for forensic specialty CABs and exist in the singular form of the Forensic Specialties Accreditation Board (FSAB). This article is intended to inform journal readership of the background, scope, and purpose of the FSAB, its current role in accrediting CABs, and its plans for participating in the continuing improvement of the forensic science practices in the United States and abroad.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 24 March 2017  
Accepted 15 May 2017

### KEYWORDS

accreditation; certification;  
conformity assessment body

### Introduction and background

In a 1995 report, the Strategic Planning Committee of the American Academy of Forensic Sciences (AAFS) reported that the quality and standards applied by different forensic certification boards varied widely. That Committee recommended that the AAFS assume a role in establishing a formal mechanism whereby the different credentialing processes of the various certification boards can be objectively assessed. During the review of this issue, AAFS recognized that an important aspect of professional oversight is monitoring the quality and consistency of credentialing of forensic specialists by the various forensic boards, i.e., accreditation of the certifiers. The AAFS Task Force on Criteria and the AAFS Professional Oversight Committee for Specialist Certifying Boards did groundwork on how to accomplish these goals. In 1996, The Accreditation and Certification Task Force, now known as the Forensic Specialties Accreditation Board (FSAB), with grant assistance from National Institute of Justice and the Forensic Science Foundation, was formed to develop a voluntary program to assess, recognize, and monitor objectively the various forensic specialty certification boards which sought accreditation. The FSAB was incorporated as an independent organization in Colorado on June 23, 2000. Since that time, the

FSAB has been an independent entity with regard to its organization and operation.

While working to develop this program, FSAB considered the accreditation of forensic certification boards by an independent organization as an option. There are organizations in the United States that set standards for individuals' specialties in fields that are related to forensics, e.g., the American Board of Medical Specialties (ABMS). The ABMS primarily sets competency standards for disciplines within the medical profession, such as radiology, surgery, etc. Forensic pathology was and is listed as a specialty under the ABMS (as a sub-group under pathology). More broadly, the American National Standards Institute (ANSI) provides accreditation services to a wide variety of Conformity Assessment Bodies (CABs) in the United States using the standard ISO 17024: 2012 (conformity assessment – general requirements for bodies operating certification of persons). The focus of ANSI accreditation, as a general proposition, is applicable to forensic specialties much as it is for stadium security guards, electricians, weapons manufacturers, and food handlers. Forensic CABs could demonstrate compliance with ANSI accreditation standards and thus be considered meeting a general international standard of competence in assessing conformity of its

own CAB certificants. However, it must be understood that ISO 17024: 2012 assesses procedural standards not the nature of the work performed by practitioners in any particular field.

The FSAB determined that the lack of relevant expertise in the forensic disciplines and in the practices of forensic specialties of the existing accreditation organizations called for the existence of an independent accrediting body that had a comprehensive, historical, and technical understanding of the disciplines involved in forensic specialties and the contexts in which they perform their duties.

### FSAB today

The FSAB, partly in response to the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) Report (2009), undertook a gap analysis to determine the existing differences between its own standards applied to CABs and the existing standard used by ANSI in its CAB accreditation undertakings, namely the aforementioned ISO Standard 17024: 2012. Following this analysis, the FSAB made changes that resulted in FSAB standards that are consistent with ISO 17024: 2012. Those changes were adopted by the FSAB during its Annual Meeting in February 2017. The transition to the new FSAB standards will take place over the next five years, with the former standards being simultaneously sunsetted as current CABs cycle through the re-accreditation schedule. The new standards can be accessed on the FSAB website ([www.thefsab.org](http://www.thefsab.org)).

In addition to the move toward evolving standards that are in accordance with international best practices for CABs, the FSAB also undertook an introspective assessment of its own guiding policies and procedures. A gap analysis was conducted to compare the FSAB policies and procedures with the international standard for accreditation bodies, i.e., ISO 17011: 2004 (conformity assessment – general requirements for accreditation bodies accrediting conformity assessment bodies). The results of this analysis led to amendments to FSAB's Policies and Procedures Manual that are in accordance with ISO 17011: 2004 requirements. These changes were also adopted by the FSAB at its Annual Meeting in February 2017. The FSAB is currently in the process of self-declaration of its conformity to ISO 17011: 2004 according to ISO 17050 (conformity assessment package).

In today's world of layered oversight and centralized control, the assumption on the part of some forensic practitioners post-NAS Report was to expect that some kind of accreditation existed for accreditation bodies such as FSAB, ANSI, ABMS, etc. Government reports after 2009 noted that FSAB was not 17011 "accredited" or recognized, for example:

But while FSAB standards are modeled on ISO/IEC 17024, its standards are not actually recognized by ISO/IEC 17011, which offers accreditation under ISO/IEC 17024, or by any other third party. (National Science and Technology Council Report, 2014: 10)

In response to these well-intentioned but unfounded expectations, FSAB reached out to experts in standards to discover that no such process exists, that is accrediting bodies themselves cannot obtain accreditation. Options that exist for such organizations are (1) the ability to self-declare one's conformance to an existing standard and (2) the ability to obtain recognition by others that do similar activity (e.g., other accrediting bodies). It should be noted that an accrediting organization cannot be 17011 "accredited" nor can it be "recognized" by the standard itself, as stated in the National Science and Technology Council Report quotation above. It should be further noted that ABMS was not cited as deficient in the same way, yet this body is situated similarly, that is, having no "higher authority" from which to receive accreditation. At the time of this writing, the ABMS makes no assertion of recognition by a peer accreditation body nor does it declare conformity with international or national standards for accreditation bodies.

As previously written, the FSAB intends to self-declare its conformity to the ISO 17011: 2004 standard following the ISO 17050 guidelines. Furthermore, FSAB or ABMS accreditation is acknowledged by the AAFS in section 1.5.3 of their Policies and Procedures as a requirement for CAB certificants to have their specialty certification listed in the AAFS Directory, specifically stating that "No other certifications may be so listed." To wit:

#### 1.5.3. Sponsorship of certification boards

Effective March 1, 2009, members or affiliates certified by organizations and professional boards that have been accredited by the Forensic Specialties Accreditation Board, Inc. (FSAB) or the American Board of Medical Specialties (ABMS) may have said certifications listed in the AAFS Directory of Members and Affiliates. No other

certifications may be so listed. This provision does not by itself confer recognition by the AAFS on the certifying entities in question. ([www.aafs.org](http://www.aafs.org); emphasis added)

The FSAB has done much to update its expectations of itself and of its CABs to address national concerns regarding the quality of forensic specialty practitioners. At the same time, the FSAB strives to maintain a reasonable fee structure to accommodate forensic specialists in their work in the justice system, especially those belonging to relatively small CABs. A side-by-side table appears below to compare FSAB and ANSI fees.

Fee Type	FSAB Fee <sup>a</sup>	ANSI Fee <sup>b</sup>
New Application for Accreditation	\$2,000.00	\$3,000.00
Application for Re-accreditation	\$500.00	\$0.00
Maintenance (annual)	CAB < 100 members \$500.00	CAB w/yrly revenue of \$0–500,000
	CAB 100–500 “ \$1,000.00	\$3,000.00
	CAB 501–1000 “ \$1,500.00	CAB w/yrly revenue of \$500,001–4,166,666
	CAB 1001–1500 “ \$2,000.00	.6%
	CAB > 1500 “ \$2,500.00	CAB w/yrly revenue > \$4,166,666 \$25,000.00

<sup>a</sup>Source: FSAB Policies and Procedures Manual

<sup>b</sup>Source: [www.ansi.org](http://www.ansi.org)

The FSAB lists its currently accredited CABs on its website. The accredited CABs are permitted to display the FSAB seal or logo on their own websites and in other promotion/advertising/informational materials. There are approximately 3,500 forensic specialists certified by FSAB accredited CABs who are entitled to say that they are “board certified by an accredited board.”

### FSAB in the future

With a goal of continuous improvement, the FSAB offers accreditation to CABs that comply with FSAB requirements and are also consistent with the international standard ISO 17024: 2012. The FSAB is committed to compliance to the international standard for accreditation bodies, ISO 17011: 2004. The FSAB offers a reasonable fee scale for application for accreditation, re-accreditation, and maintenance of accreditation between reassessment periods. The assemblage of

forensic specialty practitioners, lawyers, and judges who comprise the Directors and Affiliates of the FSAB have a broad and deep understanding of forensic disciplines that allows a specific appreciation of the undertakings of forensic specialty CABs.

In contrast to this line of thought, in a December 2016 report from the National Commission on Forensic Science regarding its “Final Views on Accreditation of Forensic Science Certification Bodies” [emphasis added], the authors wrote:

FSAB accreditation standards are modeled on ISO/IEC 17024; however, they are not recognized as meeting ISO/IEC 17011. Alternatively, ANSI is recognized as a signatory to the IAF MLA and is the only accrediting body in the United States that offers accreditation under ISO/IEC 17024, but it currently does not accredit forensic science certification bodies. Accreditation under ISO/IEC 17024 provides strategic tools to objectively assess the validity, reliability, and quality of the certification programs. A certification body accredited under ISO/IEC 17024 must demonstrate: a fair and equitable evaluation of all candidates; an organizational structure to support the mission; policy and procedures for complaints, appeals, and confidentiality; and a certification and recertification scheme.

The Commission acknowledges that there will be challenges for requiring forensic science certifying bodies to attain ISO/IEC 17024 accreditation, including the possibility they may need to change operating practices (Appendix D). Potentially, they would have to develop new categories of testing and provide varying levels of certification; as a result, certification costs may increase. (NCFS Report 2016)

The forensic community should be wary of delegating its professional oversight responsibility to generalized, non-forensic organizations that examine only procedure and do not consider the nature or substance of the work being done by practitioners. In theory, an ISO 17024: 2012 recognition could be provided to specialty groups offering certification in forensic divination or forensic telepathy. Additionally, because of the unique nature of the forensic disciplines and the relatively small numbers of specialists credentialed by each organization, the forensic CABs may decide it is better to be assessed by an accrediting organization dedicated to that task that also has a thorough understanding of the forensic disciplines. Furthermore, forensic practitioners in small or large CABs may ask why financial barriers related to the number of members should prohibit specialists from contributing their expertise to a case.

Although the NAS Report determined that certification and accreditation are ideal standings for forensic practitioners and CABs, it should be acknowledged that in most states these are voluntary undertakings by the individuals or groups. (Note: Currently only the state of Texas has legislation requiring that for admission of forensic analysis evidence in criminal cases all forensic entities must be accredited and forensic analysts must be certified unless exempted from accreditation or certification by the Texas Forensic Science Commission [TFSC].) First party audit, otherwise known as an internal audit of conformity to a standard, is still possible for any practitioner or CAB. Likewise, second party audit (e.g., a customer or client provide a review of practitioner/ CAB services) is another option. A third-party audit (objective, outside review) is the highest expectation for the practitioner and/or CAB and is conducted by external, impartial expert(s) according to ISO 9001: 2015 (quality management systems) definition. To be deemed an “expert” suggests a person who is attuned to the intricacies, recent developments, technologies, contexts of use, and limitations of the specialty area being audited, not simply an expert in assessment or an expert in test-taking or test-making.

In summary, the FSAB has been in existence as an independent, forensic specialty accreditation organization since 2000 and considers itself as an agent of continuous improvement for the forensic specialties that conform to FSAB standards and requirements and apply those standards in legal settings. By its own internal audit and subsequent upgrades to apply and meet the applicable international standards, the FSAB has demonstrated its grasp of the importance of improved quality expectations in forensic practices in the United States as well as internationally. The FSAB offers reasonable fees for both large and small CABs as it views the size and financial status of CABs to be unrelated to the quality of its conformity assessment services. The FSAB also considers specific, forensic science expertise in its assessments, requiring more of its CABs than procedural standards. Recognizing the importance of the foresight of the AAFS and the NIJ over two decades ago, the FSAB continues to strive to be a model for others who seek to develop and opti-

mize forensic practitioner and CAB standards. The forensic specialties and the oversight bodies must navigate the rapidly changing developments and adjustments to forensic science practices, certifications and accreditations, while simultaneously acknowledging the importance of the role of forensic evidence analysis in the justice system. Forensic CABs of all sizes exist to serve the public and their products are not industrial or marketed for profit. A diversity of accreditation and certification choices should exist for practitioners and CABs to meet the standard of conformity and competence in their particular specialty. The FSAB is a modern, highly qualified option that focuses on continuous improvement for itself and its accredited forensic specialty CABs.

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