

What Gets “Accredited” in Ultrasound “Accreditation”?

The word has a nice ring to it—“accreditation.” But what does it actually mean? And what does a health care facility need to do to achieve accreditation, especially by an organization like the American Institute of Ultrasound in Medicine (AIUM)?

Why Should Accreditation Matter to You?

If your doctor’s practice or your hospital’s ultrasound, radiology, or ob-gyn department has achieved AIUM accreditation, it means that a significant milestone in patient care has been reached.

AIUM accreditation, a voluntary peer-review process, involves a stem-to-stern, top-to-bottom check-up on all aspects of an ultrasound practice. These aspects include doctor qualifications, physical facilities, the ultrasound machines, the detailed instructions (protocols) for performing each ultrasound test, and the policies in place for safeguarding the health and safety of every patient who has an ultrasound examination, plus much more.

Setting Benchmarks for Equipment, Staff, and Tests

The AIUM’s Ultrasound Practice Accreditation Council is made up of professionals with an interest in quality ultrasound: obstetricians, gynecologists, radiologists, family practitioners, surgeons, and sonographers. Their goal is to provide health care facilities with the detailed specifications—based on nationally accepted standards—and the tools they need to perform ultrasound procedures accurately and consistently.

Here’s an example: like any piece of high-tech equipment, an ultrasound machine needs to be calibrated regularly against some recognized benchmark, like a standardized plastic “phantom” that closely mimics the ultrasound characteristics of live human organs and tissues. This ensures that the ultrasound images from each procedure will give the most accurate and complete clinical information for the sonographer and your doctor.

The quality of the examinations is judged by reviewing actual case studies to see that they are complete, detailed, technically acceptable, and accurately reported.

To keep staff members who perform ultrasound examinations up-to-date on the latest and best practices in the field, the AIUM requires appropriate training, as well as continuing education in the field.

What It Takes to Achieve Accreditation—and Keep It

When an ultrasound practice—such as a hospital’s radiology or ob-gyn department—applies to the AIUM for accreditation, an assessment of every aspect of the practice’s operation (including both staff and equipment) is required. For accreditation, ultrasound facilities must have:

- Well-qualified personnel. How much education, years of clinical experience, and continuing medical education has each staff member had? Have the doctors received

specialty training? Is each staff member certified by an eminent body like the American Registry of Diagnostic Medical Sonographers (ARDMS)?

- High standards for the performance of each ultrasound procedure. Do the procedures meet, or even exceed, national standards?
- Appropriate ultrasound facilities and equipment. Is there enough space for patients' comfort and privacy? Is the equipment sufficiently up-to-date to produce top-notch diagnostic images?
- Adequate record-keeping. Does the ultrasound practice keep permanent and complete records of every procedure, and are they easy to retrieve when needed?
- Quality assurance guidelines. Are standards for consistency and accuracy in place and used routinely by all staff members?

Inevitably, the thoroughness of the review required for AIUM accreditation uncovers both strengths and weaknesses in an ultrasound practice.

So the next step is to formulate specific, workable solutions to remedy any problems, and then demonstrate to the AIUM Ultrasound Practice Accreditation Council that the changes meet their expectations. Perhaps, some staff members need further education and training in new developments in ultrasound. Or, the review may reveal a need for new, dedicated ultrasound equipment.

Accreditation is not just a onetime assessment. Ultrasound practices accredited by the AIUM must go through the same exhaustive audit every 3 years, to retain their accreditation.

In short, AIUM accreditation provides a good measure of reassurance for patients. This accreditation is the hallmark of an ultrasound practice that meets nationally accepted standards of patient care, demonstrates consistent excellence, and is current with the latest ultrasound technology.