

On Board certification

Perhaps no topic in pediatric dentistry polarizes like Board certification. A discussion of the process is sure to start a battle of the antonyms. Words like supportive, renewing, rejuvenating, enlightening, and fulfilling battle those like intimidating, draining, expensive, and invasive. "Professional" and "Mickey Mouse" often go head-to-head in the expression of feelings and experiences. We all have our opinion on the process, and it isn't always related to whether we've achieved Diplomate status or not. War stories abound (interestingly, on both sides of the examination table) and feelings run high.

I believe the certification process elicits so much emotion because it hits close to home. The specific criticisms and plaudits of certification are small change when held up against the real reason we get excited about the American Board of Pediatric Dentistry. Board certification is, plain and simple, the singular most significant recognition in our profession that we are what we claim to be. You can graduate with honors from a fine school, make a million or two, be elected this or that, and have a half dozen letters after your name, but it's where the latex meets the lips that we find our professional meaning in this clinical field of pediatric dentistry. We can lay claim to titles and degrees, but Board certification remains the ultimate recognition of our professional being. It is the laurel, the gold, and the varsity letter of the clinical profession of pediatric dentistry.

Part of the negative emotion comes from looking around and seeing colleagues who are boarded, but whose skills or priorities have changed or may not measure up today. It is true that we can see that the "gold" is tarnished now for some. Diplomate status was easier for some to achieve than others, which also may trivialize it in people's minds. However, these inequities are a part of any human achievement. They can fuel criticism of the process, but cannot diminish

the prize which, in its time and place, stands for excellence.

It is this closeness to our professional being that makes the issue so explosive. It's what prompted the Board of Trustees to establish a subcommittee to look at the American Board and the process of certification, and it is the recognition of the intensity of emotion that prompted the American Board to seek external review. After half a century of mystery, myth, and misunderstanding, the process of certification will get an airing.

The external reviewers will receive many opinions and thoughts. Here are some more.

Change in the certification process clearly is needed. The passage of half a century is reason enough to look critically at the nature of Board certification. Communication and accountability should be the operational goals of the external review.

Much of the discontent and emotion around certification might be eliminated by better communication between the Academy and the American Board, at both leadership and membership levels. The American Board already has made attempts to improve communication and dialog with members. An example is the Board's attendance at the Academy Review Course and at component meetings.

Improved communication between the Academy leadership and the American Board is more difficult. In the past, concerns for confidentiality and conflict of interest kept these two groups apart. Today's watchword is accountability and the two groups should not be seeking ways to avoid intimacy or its appearance, but rather to work *together* to effect a process which is relevant, impartial, and educational. The concept of dual participation may shake the ivory tower image of the American Board held by some, but according to Webster and others, *to sponsor* means to accept responsibility for, and without more interaction between the Academy and the American Board, the Academy is not fulfilling its role as sponsor. We can

continue to maintain our distance and accept the negatives, or take the opportunity to work together to create a new dynamic, representative, and contemporary system of professional development that can serve as a model for other specialties to follow.

There are some who would dilute the achievement by granting Diplomate status to those with longevity or academic rank. A hallmark of certification is that it is there for all to *earn*, if they choose. It is a nobility of rank open to the commoner who is but willing to strive for it. To make certification a gold watch rather than a gold medal would be a mistake.

One way to enshrine the dignity of the achievement is to require periodic recertification of Diplo-

mates. I, for one, don't relish the idea of reliving the examination process for Diplomate, but basking in the afterglow of getting there is still fresh enough in my mind to get my competitive juices going. Recertification can be educational and constructive, a tune-up rather than a turn-off. It would be a first among the dental specialties, and would ensure that the skills and knowledge of the Diplomate were "as good as gold."

I have one last request for the external examiners... keep the luster.

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