

What is a Diplomate?



A good friend of mine was married in a civil ceremony a number of years ago. The ceremony was officiated by a local judge. A few years after the wedding, the judge was disbarred because of improprieties that had nothing to do with this marriage. However, after hearing of the disbarred judge, my friend questioned his friends, I assume in jest, whether this invalidated his marriage.

The above vignette brings to mind a similar situation as it relates to dental specialties, in which legal action based upon technicalities could reverse well-established guidelines.

In the United States there are nine recognized dental specialties: Dental Public Health, Endodontics, Oral and Maxillofacial Surgery, Oral and Maxillofacial Pathology, Oral and Maxillofacial Radiology, Orthodontics and Dentofacial Orthopedics, Pediatric Dentistry, Periodontics, and Prosthodontics. To the best of my knowledge, this represents the largest number of dental specialties of any country in the world. All of these specialties have specific standards that are created by the specialty itself but then go through communities of interest and ultimately are approved or modified by the Commission on Dental Accreditation (CODA) of the American Dental Association (ADA). Once training in a dental specialty is completed, an individual may elect to challenge the board of the respective specialty, which then allows him or her to become a diplomate of that specialty. The term diplomate is defined by CODA as "any dentist who has successfully met the requirements of the board for certification and remains in good standing."

Unfortunately, the definition of diplomate does not specifically state that the diplomate must be trained in one of the nine specialties. Although this is not stated, it is likely assumed. Perhaps two other definitions CODA supplies clarify that a diplomate is specifically wedded to the specialty: *Educationally Qualified* (an individual is considered educationally qualified after the successful completion of an advanced educational program, which is accredited by CODA) and *Board Eligible* (an individual is board eligible when his/her application has been submitted to and approved by the board and his/her eligibility has not expired).

Diplomate status is being raised here because of recent legal developments in which two states, California and Florida, now allow individual dentists to publicize their diplomate status in disciplines that are not regarded as dental specialties by the ADA. The reason that the states allow this is not related to legislation, but rather to litigation. Legal issues were raised regarding the freedom of speech of individuals who had completed examinations that were developed by dental societies in dental disciplines.

Freedom of speech is sacrosanct in the United States and consequently it should not be surprising to find states allowing individuals who have completed an examination to disseminate this information. The obvious concern, however, is that an examination that has not been validated externally may lack sufficient rigor to

ensure that the public is not misled by the documentation of such credentials. Clearly the public is not privy to all the terms that are defined by CODA. Patients may assume that an individual who is certified by a specific board is also a specialist in that discipline; the fact that the discipline itself may not reflect one of the nine specialties may not be appreciated.

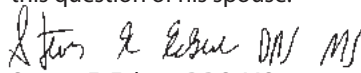
Frankly, as a specialist in Prosthodontics who has become a diplomate in this specialty, I believe strongly in the specialty programs and in the recognition of individuals who have worked to become diplomates in them. Speaking for myself, I see this as an achievement for which I enjoy the recognition that I was selected to graduate training and then succeeded in demonstrating skills to a board that represents my peers. This does not mean that I view others who have not completed the boards or those who have chosen not to specialize as somehow less capable; this is also not to denigrate the efforts of others in disciplines that may not be recognized as specialties. There are many practitioners in dentistry who perform technically complex procedures and do these procedures at a high level of proficiency, but this does not equate with being a specialist. It is all a matter of definition of terms and appreciation of semantics.

How might an individual who has worked hard in a non-specialty be recognized for those efforts? The traditional method has been for such an individual to be awarded fellowship in different dental academies or societies. When the term diplomate is applied, however, the rules seem to differ. Indeed, the use of the term diplomate has traditionally been reserved for those who complete specialty training and then successfully challenge the specialty board.

Is there a method to demonstrate skills and/or knowledge for those who gain them in a discipline but have not trained in a recognized specialty? If an independent examining board has certified these skills or knowledge outside of the parameters of recognized specialties, maybe there should be a qualifier to the status of diplomate. Perhaps the solution is a fine-print disclaimer to the effect that the individual has become a diplomate of a discipline that is not a recognized dental specialty through completion of an examination that was administered by an examining board that has not been rigorously vetted by the ADA.

One wonders whether the judicial branch of government would strike down a requirement from a state dental board that the alternate use of the term diplomate be clearly defined to the public as a matter of appropriate disclosure. As well, would freedom of speech preclude acceptance of the specific definition of terms?

Of course, my friend who was married by the disbarred judge continues to wonder if his marriage is valid. My hope is that he chooses diplomacy and avoids asking this question of his spouse.


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