

Plastic Surgery: When looking for a doctor, what does 'board certification' really mean?

By DR. ALAN MUSKETT
Plastic Surgery

I'm sure you've seen stories about some guy in Miami doing liposuction and facelifts, and then someone discovers the only formal training he had was in the metal shop at Florida State Correctional.

As patients and consumers, we like to think we are protected, so let's look at how doctors are checked out.

I'll run you through the process I went through to demonstrate how things work.

After high school graduation, some type of four-year college degree is next. I got an English Literature degree from Montana State with electives in pre-med courses. I then entered the University of Washington Medical School.

After two years of classroom work, I took the first of a three-part national exam. Passing that gave me the chance to take the next two years of clinical training, and after that another exam. I did a year of surgical internship, and took the third part of the test so I could call myself a doctor. Not a specialist, just a generic doctor.

Another five years of surgical training followed, and each year I took what is called an "in-service" exam to assess my progress.

After completing a surgical residency, I took a 400-question written American Board of Surgery qualifying examination, which gave me the chance to take the oral examination - a test where you are sequestered in a room three times for an hour with two very mean old surgeons who grill you like a murder suspect.

It actually feels like they use pliers on your teeth and apply electric shocks in tender places! There is a third person in the room, an observer, to make sure the first two guys are being mean enough.

I was then certified by the American Board of Surgery - board certified - and I stay certified as long as I take another exam every 10 years.

After that experience, I then did a cardiovascular residency, during which I took annual tests, and then did the American Board of Thoracic Surgery written test, which qualified me for the oral exam.

Six even meaner, older and sourer men raked me over the coals for that one, and I got my board certification for that specialty. Again, every 10 years I had to recertify. To practice in Montana, I endured criminal checks, another round of a thousand letters and a look behind my ears to see if I had washed.

After 12 years of heart surgery, I made the exciting and challenging decision to do a residency in plastic surgery.

After yearly in-service exams, I finished the residency and found out Plastic Surgery Boards were the worst yet. I had to collect the 1,500 cases I did in residency and report those in detail.

I had to have letters from my entire faculty, every hospital I had worked in my life, a note from my third-grade teacher about a gum-chewing episode and letters from every state where I had practiced.

Once those were approved, I had to report every case I did in my first year of practice, with records and pictures, which involved 230 patients. For a \$1,500 fee, I got to take another 400-question written test.

Surviving that, I prepared for the oral exams - \$1,750. I had studied daily for three years for that, and I was glad I did. This was my third oral exam, and these guys and gals were the most malignant yet.

For three days in Phoenix, they reviewed my cases, grilled me in dark rooms and acted as if every answer I gave was the most ridiculous they had ever heard.

The written examination was failed by 21 percent and the oral by 22 percent, meaning that of the original 300 surgeons who started the process, less than 200 were certified.

I get to take that test every 10 years now, too.

So that is board certification. When you see a board-certified plastic surgeon, you can be sure they have been beaten like a rented mule. Oh, I mean they have been examined to the limit of reason and beyond.

A few other things about board certification. The American Board of Medical Specialties has a list of approved boards (<http://www.abms.org/>) that meet the criteria for rigorous certification processes. Some boards have been created to lend the status of board certification, so check to see that the specialty you are seeking is listed with ABMS, and that your doctor is certified by the specific board.

Also, make sure that procedure you are having is one done by members of that board. I can tell you I am certified by three different surgical boards, but that doesn't mean I should be doing your prostate operation, because I am not certified by the urology board.

I have now taken 21 national examinations, been credentialed by a dozen hospitals and have been vetted by five state medical licensing boards.

That's not an unusual situation for a Billings physician. Billings Clinic and St. Vincent Healthcare require that you are either board-certified or in the process, or you get the boot.

Although the process may not be perfect, there have been great strides in consumer/patient protection.

Your task as a patient is to check to see that your doctor is well-credentialed in the area you need care.

Although I heard the guy in Miami was pretty good ...

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