



Demystifying Dental Specialty Credentials

The value of advanced dental credentials is both important to the dentist and also our dental patients. What do these advanced dental credentials mean and which credentials reveal the dentist is a board-certified dental specialist? The first professional dental degree in the United States is either the Doctor of Dental Surgery (DDS), Doctor of Dental Medicine (DMD) or a foreign dental equivalent such as the Bachelor of Dental Surgery (BDS) or Doctor of Medical Dentistry (DrMedDent).¹ In the United States, the first professional dental degree is a professional doctorate similar to the Doctor of Medicine (MD) or Juris Doctor (JD). With this degree, the individual has obtained basic training as a dentist and has graduated from the degree-granting university. Dentists with this degree are eligible to practice general dentistry once local and federal government licensure requirements are met.

Advanced dental credentials on the other hand reveal that the dentist has obtained either additional education or recognition beyond their basic dental qualification. These advanced dental credentials, displayed as letters after the dentist's name, are confusing to the public and may be perceived to be dental specialty credentials by those unfamiliar with them. These additional credentials can be grouped into three categories: (1) board certification of a dental specialty, (2) additional advanced graduate degrees such as a MS or PhD, and (3) a fellowship or other special recognition within a specific dental organization. Organization bylaws in addition to state dental boards govern the use of these additional letters placed after the dentist's name. Generally, these rules are designed to ensure that the public does not perceive the additional credentials as advanced degrees from qualified institutions. Each of these three categories will be explained below.

1. Prosthodontics is one of twelve specialties recognized and approved by the National Certifying Boards for Dental Specialists (NCRDSCB). The other eleven recognized dental specialties include: dental anesthesiology, dental public health, endodontics, oral and maxillofacial pathology, oral and maxillofacial radiology, oral and maxillofacial surgery, oral medicine, orthodontics and dentofacial orthopedics, orofacial pain, pediatric dentistry, and periodontics. Prosthodontics is the dental specialty pertaining to the diagnosis, treatment planning, rehabilitation and maintenance of the oral function, comfort, appearance and health of patients with clinical conditions associated with missing or deficient teeth and/or oral and maxillofacial tissues using biocompatible substitutes.² Residency programs in prosthodontics are accredited through a very elaborate process administered by the Commission on Dental Accreditation (CODA), which closely monitors all training of dentists and specialists. To become a specialist in prosthodontics, completion of a residency training program at an approved institution is required and results in a "Certificate of Completion".

Dentists that complete this advanced training and are awarded the Certificate of Completion do not have additional initials to display. However, they can use words and phrases such as “Specialist in Prosthodontics”, “Practice limited to Prosthodontics” or Prosthodontist to indicate that they have completed an approved training program as stated above. State licensing boards require completion of an approved training program in order to use such terminology on all correspondence, signage, business cards, etc. Most state boards allow a general dentist to advertise that they do prosthodontic procedures, but they cannot use any wording indicating specialist status and must state, “these services are offered by a general dentist”. Prosthodontists, upon completion of the training, can attain board certification by completing a comprehensive written, oral, and clinical examination administered by the American Board of Prosthodontics. Upon successfully challenging these rigorous examinations, they are recognized as Diplomates of the American Board of Prosthodontics. If the dentist is a fellow of an organization that represents the dental specialty, i.e. The American College of Prosthodontists, then the corresponding letters (FACP) or “Fellow of the American College of Prosthodontists” may be used to indicate that the dentist is board-certified in the specialty of prosthodontics. Use of these credentials indicating board certification from one of the twelve recognized specialties is universally accepted and can be used on all correspondence.

2. The second category listed above is an advanced dental degree awarded by a university, and is most often an MS, MSD, or PhD.^{3,4} A master’s degree may be course-based, research-based or both. This includes the Master of Science (MS), Master of Arts (MA), Master of Medical Sciences (MMSc) or Master of Research (MRes). Doctoral degrees are research doctorates in recognition of academic research that is publishable in peer-reviewed journals. The most well-known research degree is the Doctor of Philosophy (PhD). Some universities also confer the Doctor of Medical Science (DMSc) or Doctor of Science in Dentistry (DScD) degrees as clinical doctorate degree. Use of these letters is universally accepted as it indicates to both professionals and laypersons that the individual has an advanced degree from a university.

3. The third category of initials stated above is where it can get confusing. There are several non-recognized “specialties” and several of them also have a process for board certification. Many of these “focus areas” are thought to be specialties by consumers. A partial example of these organizations is listed below:
 - Oral Implantology/Implant Dentistry
 - Esthetic and Cosmetic Dentistry
 - Operative Dentistry
 - Biomimetic Dentistry



- Dental Sleep Medicine
- Special Needs Dentistry
- Geriatric Dentistry

Most of these “focus areas” also have continuing education standards and goals, which allow dentists to obtain a certain status in the sponsoring organization; some even have an educational requirement and a comprehensive examination process after which the individual can become board-certified in that particular area and thus identify as a diplomate. It is important to remember that these credentials, however, are not part of the twelve recognized specialties and advanced training in these areas of focus falls within the realm of the aforementioned specialties. An example of this would be the advanced training in esthetic and operative dentistry that prosthodontists receive during their residency training programs.

The American Board of Dental Specialties⁵ represents and sets standards for non-CODA recognized specialties. There are currently four member boards which include The American Board of Oral Implantology, The American Board of Oral Medicine, The American Board of Orofacial Pain, and The American Dental Board of Anesthesiology. These organizations typically do have residency-based training programs but have not been recognized by the NCRDSCB as a specialty. As of March 2020, the National Commission on Recognition of Dental Specialties and Certifying Boards approved Dental Anesthesiology, Oral Medicine, and Orofacial Pain as newly recognized dental specialties, culminating a total of twelve specialties now recognized by the NCRDSCB.² While the American Boards of Dental Anesthesiology and Oral Medicine have also become recognized by the NCRDSCB, the American Board of Orofacial Pain is still governed by the American Board of Dental Specialties and has not yet been recognized as a certifying board despite the recognition of Orofacial Pain as a dental specialty.⁶

Some organizations such as the Academy of General Dentistry (AGD) set continuing education goals and honor their members with additional recognition. For example, a fellow of the AGD (FAGD) has completed 500 hours of qualified education and passed a comprehensive written examination. The organization then offers fellows the opportunity to join a mastership program (MAGD) which requires 1,100 hours of specific continuing education.⁷ Credentials such as these are very honorable and indicate a dentists’ dedication, but their use is restricted by the ADA Code of Ethics⁸ to publications and professional curriculum vitae. In general, these credentials can be used amongst professionals but cannot be advertised to the general public as they may be misconstrued as an additional university-based degree or a form of specialty training.



Discussion of the problem:

As our society enters an ever-increasing environment of advertising, Internet searches and healthcare marketing, it is important that consumers of these services be made aware of what their provider's credentials actually represent. For instance, a general dentist can add the words "implant dentistry" to their advertising, but this would imply that the individual has at least advanced training in this area which may not be true. This represents a potential patient safety issue as treatment may be administered that is not only inappropriate but also not to the established standard of care. Furthermore, many organizations in dentistry have established educational goals or certifying examinations which award the individual the title of "fellow" or "diplomate". Again, improper use of these credentials could mislead the public as to the recognized qualifications of the provider.

Position:

It is the position of the American College of Prosthodontics that only individuals who have completed an NCRDSCB recognized specialty program in prosthodontics be allowed to declare themselves a "Prosthodontist" or "Specialist in Prosthodontics". Dentists who perform prosthodontic procedures in their practice must clearly state that they are a general dentist or other NCRDSCB -recognized specialist, if not a prosthodontist. Furthermore, the use of additional "letters" following the dentists name when presented to the public should be limited to institutionally awarded advanced degrees and specialty board certification in one of the twelve recognized dental specialties. This is in alignment with State Dental Licensing Boards and the ADA Professional Code of Ethics.⁸ Additional abbreviations as listed above in category 3 should only be used in publications, curriculum vitae or amongst professionals to indicate professional status. These credentials should not be used when marketing to consumers who would have a difficulty understanding their significance. Board certification helps ensure the public that formal training has been completed and a sufficient knowledge base in the specialty has been demonstrated.



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