

Protecting the Public: Myth or Reality?

The 2002 California Dental Association House of Delegates passed a resolution requesting that the Council on Education and Professional Relations establish a task force to study the California licensure examination and alternatives and file a report to the 2003 house.

Last month, we commented in this space about some of the problems surrounding the clinical examination that have surfaced in recent years. Many in the profession have raised questions about the purpose and rationale for the clinical licensure examination given these increasing concerns.

As a result of the aforementioned CDA house action, a task force on clinical licensure evaluation was appointed to study the issues and to consider potential alternatives to address the concerns here in California. We recently had the opportunity to hear some of the expert testimony presented to the task force and believe that discussion of a couple issues is relevant at this time. While some options involving changes in the examination were aired, it is premature to discuss them at this time.

We believe that the purpose of the clinical exam should be at the center of the discussions. Many within the profession, including dental examiners, have believed for years that the examination helps to determine whether a candidate possesses the skills or abilities to provide competent treatment to patients. They fervently believe that a function or goal

of board examinations is protection of the public.

Testimony to the task force provided data showing that 98 percent of candidates pass the California clinical exam and are licensed within one year. However, the task force learned that no data exists supporting a conclusion that this significant majority of candidates who successfully passed the clinical examination will continuously provide the competent care that will protect the public. A one-shot exam or evaluation in any discipline is considered a "snapshot" in time. It reflects what the performance was at the time of the examination but can tell nothing about the current or future performance in practice.

Therefore, a question has been raised that we believe has some merit: "Is the achievement of protection of the public through clinical licensure examination a myth or a reality?" Does a single snapshot of a candidate's restorative skills or clinical judgment as measured by a Dental Board clinical examination after graduation ensure that the dentist will either immediately or continuously throughout his or her career provide competent care to the public? The response to this question, whether positive or negative, is little more than an assumption due to lack of data that tracks career clinician performance.

One of the experts, Dr. David Chambers of the University of the Pacific,



A one-shot exam reflects what the performance was at the time of the examination but can tell nothing about the current or future performance in practice.

Resolution of the deficiencies in the current licensing process should be the first order of business.

stated that research data shows that “Increasingly, dentistry is about managing patients and their oral health over extended periods of time. In particular, the one-shot evaluation format is limited to testing one-shot tasks. No matter how well-designed, a test of one-shot performance will not be able to measure the large realm of dental practice behaviors that occur in context and over time.” Additional testimony showed that reliability of dental board exams is well below the standard necessary to predict ability and that performance and ability are not the same.

We must also consider another longstanding part of the controversy surrounding licensure exams: whether passage of the current clinical examination by newly trained specialists provides any evidence that these practitioners will provide competent treatment to the public *in their specialty* as a result of their performance on the rather narrow skill areas that make up current board examinations. Again, due to the lack of any data about practitioner career performance trends, we cannot assume that a one-shot board licensure exam will accurately predict that either generalists or specialists who are successful on the licensing examination will be able to consistently deliver competent care.

Further, we suggest that there really are two issues involved that would be best separated. One, as discussed last month, is the need to eliminate deficiencies in the current licensure *process* in California. These problems are negatively affecting the lives of the newer members of our profession and deserve immediate attention. The other issue relative to dental licensure exams in general (not just

the board examination in California) is to determine what reliable mechanism(s) can be developed to evaluate the ability of practitioners to ensure that the public is protected from incompetent dental care. While solutions to the concerns surrounding these two issues might at some point be connected, we believe that it is necessary to address them separately.

What might it take to ensure that the goal of protection of the public becomes an achievable reality? Those knowledgeable on the issue, such as Dr. Chambers, believe that a “portfolio” approach, where dentist ability can be measured on a continuing basis over time in the dental curriculum, may be the most practical methodology to consider. It is believed that trends in practitioner performance and behavior are essential to measure or determine competency. This might again raise the concept of “continuing competency,” which has been a topic of considerable controversy within the profession in the past.

As we mentioned here last month, resolution of the deficiencies in the current licensing process should be the first order of business and will require cooperation from all affected parties, which includes the Dental Board, the California Dental Association, and the California dental schools.

The issues of protecting the public and the continuing competency of licensees in providing care are also deserving of the cooperative discussion of all parties if evaluation measures that will protect the public are to become a reality. This issue extends well beyond the California state line. It is an issue that deserves the attention of the profession throughout the country.

CDA