An Open Letter to Optometrists from the ABO Board of Directors

Dear Colleagues,

A few years ago, a small group of optometrists, unhappy that the profession created a board certification program, formed the American Optometric Society (AOS). They brought a lawsuit against the American Board of Optometry, stating that board certification was confusing, deceptive and misleading to the public. On August 2, 2012, after only a few days of trial, Federal District Court Judge A. Howard Matz granted our motion for entry of a judgment in the ABO’s favor.

Sadly, the vitriol against board certification and the ABO continues, even in the face of discussions about healing our beloved profession. As leaders of the ABO, we feel we must respond.

While no one can claim to be clairvoyant, the leaders of the AAO, AOA, ASCO and AOSA have looked at the direction health care is heading and determined that, in order to retain parity with medicine, it is necessary that a board certification process be put into place. ABO board certification is entirely voluntary. And it is evolving. We are all proud to be serving optometry in this way, and we are committed to making the ABO Board Certification and Maintenance of Certification processes meaningful representations of the commitment to lifelong learning that we feel they represent.

Many of us are old enough to have been in practice when optometrists were not allowed to dilate pupils, much less treat glaucoma. It was the leaders of our profession who fought legislative battles to get the laws changed so that we could practice to the level we do today. Those battles were as controversial in optometry in the 1970’s and 80’s as board certification is today.

Is there anyone currently in practice who would want to go back to the days when non-contact tonometry and direct ophthalmoscopy were our best diagnostic tools? Or when we had to send anyone with new floaters to an ophthalmologist because we could not do a dilated exam? Or when it was great that we could call a friendly M.D. to write a prescription for bacitracin ointment for a patient with blepharitis? We didn't think so.

But 30 years ago, a small group of optometrists (who did not want to go to the trouble or expense of obtaining the additional training and certifications) were concerned that their practices would be harmed by their colleagues with a broader scope of practice. Sound familiar? The only difference is that without the Internet, they were not able to organize into a bully pulpit that could reach 30,000 optometrists with one click of a mouse.
We feel that it is time to put down the swords and begin working together. Board certification for optometrists is not going away. You think the exams we’re giving need some tweaking? Become Board Certified and join the exam writing team to help us make them better. You think that there are messages we need to convey that we are not? Contact us and suggest how we can do it better. You think there are issues we’re not addressing? Get involved! There are currently nearly 1,000 ABO Diplomates. Many of them have helped us write exams and develop programs for the maintenance process. They are great people. Come join them. We have much more work to do.

We all love optometry. We want to maintain our independence and our parity with medicine no matter how health care changes in the future--and make no mistake, it is changing.

You don’t have to become board certified if you don’t want to. But just consider where you want this profession to be in 20 or 30 years. And where we would all be today if the leadership of our organizations 30 years ago had not foreseen the need to grow in the direction of increased medical privileges?

And now we must all get back to work. There is an exam coming up, and there are many optometrists who would like to use their years in practice to qualify for the exam before the Phase-In Rules expire. We expect a big surge in the next few months. We hope you’ll join us.

With love and respect for our great profession,

*The Board of Directors of the American Board of Optometry*

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