

A change in the certification process by the American Board of Orthodontics

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The American Board of Orthodontics (ABO) celebrated 75 years of existence in 2004. In 1930, the ABO stated in its application for a charter of incorporation that its objectives were “to elevate the standards of the practice of orthodontia; to familiarize the public with its aims and ideals; to protect the public against irresponsible and unqualified practitioners”¹

The ABO’s main objective has been and continues to be to achieve the highest standards of excellence in clinical orthodontics via certification. This objective has been enhanced to provide a method of repeatedly assuring that such standards prevail throughout a professional’s career using a process of recertification. The board’s vision is to welcome as many educationally qualified orthodontists into the process as possible. Its ultimate goal is to develop a system in which certification begins early in an orthodontist’s career and continues to be renewed via recertification during his or her clinical lifetime.

In the 1930s, only a few orthodontic programs were associated with university-based dental schools, and most orthodontists were educated in proprietary schools or as preceptors.² The ABO was formed to establish national standards for orthodontists through a testing process.

Throughout its history, the ABO has modified the examination process, both to increase its efficiency and to encourage more practitioners to achieve board certification. For example, in 1973, the board began offering the Phase II written examination immediately after postdoctoral orthodontic education, rather

than waiting until orthodontists had been in practice for 5 years. As early as the 1980s, the ABO directors discussed the possibility of certifying orthodontists soon after they graduated from an accredited school. In the 1990s, numerous pathways were developed to motivate orthodontists to complete certification. However, 75 years after the ABO’s inception, the percentage of American Association of Orthodontists (AAO) members who have attained board certification remains low, between the mid teens and the high 20s.

One of our missions as orthodontists, both collectively and individually, should be to improve the orthodontic services we provide to patients who have entrusted themselves to our care. The ABO is sponsored by the AAO, is recognized by the American Dental Association as the only certifying body for orthodontics, and has been charged to conduct examinations to evaluate the knowledge and skills of practicing orthodontists as a component of our specialty’s pursuit of clinical excellence. The board will achieve its long-standing objective of clinical excellence only when most orthodontists are willing to participate in the certification process.

The directors of the ABO, having significantly considered all factors that impact board certification, believe that every educationally qualified orthodontist should demonstrate clinical competency by completing the ABO certification process at the conclusion of their education and keep the certification up to date with periodic reexaminations. The following discussion will elaborate on the board’s new plans to realize this goal.

A NEW AND BASIC PREMISE

The board’s current effort proceeds from a new premise: *early entry into certification followed by continued reexamination throughout an orthodontist’s career will encourage a higher standard of care.*

The concept of early certification followed by recertification is a potentially effective means of en-

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Submitted and accepted January 2005.

Am J Orthod Dentofacial Orthop 2005;127:278-81

0889-5406/\$30.00

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doi:10.1016/j.ajodo.2005.01.003

couraging the development and maintenance of a practitioner's clinical skills. This system is intended to assure continued competency and progress toward proficiency, thus maximally serving both the public and our profession.

How can the board engage the majority of our specialty to participate in the certification and subsequent recertification process? In the following discussion, we outline a transitional plan that embraces both practicing orthodontists who have yet to become board certified and orthodontists still involved in their education.

CERTIFICATION-RECERTIFICATION FOR THE PRACTICING ORTHODONTIST: THE GATEWAY OFFER

The ABO will now provide nonboarded practicing orthodontists a new route to board certification: the "Gateway Offer" (block 6 in the Figure). The following are its essential components:

1. This is a one-time offer, to begin March 1, 2005, and end July 1, 2007.
2. All practicing orthodontists who have successfully passed the Phase II written examination can apply for certification via the ABO website³ or by writing to the ABO central office. The Gateway diplomate will receive an ABO certificate that is valid for 5 years, with the expiration date conspicuously displayed. The Gateway Offer will also be extended to graduates of the orthodontic classes of 2005, 2006, and 2007 who pass the Phase II examination (Figure, blocks 1, 2, 5, 7, and 9).
3. Recertification is mandatory and must be completed before the expiration date on the certificate. Failure to recertify will result in forfeiture of certification, all privileges and reference to diplomate status will be revoked, and the diplomate's name will be deleted from all official listings of current diplomates.
4. A fee of \$1880 will be assessed to obtain the 5-year, time-limited ABO certificate, and an annual fee of \$125 will be required to maintain certification during the 5-year period. These fees will include the Phase III first recertification examination. Failure to recertify will not entitle the orthodontist to a refund.

Alternative options

Orthodontists who are currently board-eligible but do not accept the Gateway Offer by July 1, 2007, can still pursue ABO certification under the present system. The current Phase III certification examination will be offered in February 2006, 2007, and 2008.⁴ If application for the examination was made before January 1, 1998, successful completion will entitle the new diplo-

mate to a nontime-limited certificate. If application was made after January 1, 1998, the certificate will carry a 15-year time limit. The current Phase III examination will thereafter be discontinued. Options I and II pathways as well as board-eligible status⁶ will expire after February 2008 (Figure, blocks 7 and 8).

Orthodontists who have not taken or have not passed the Phase II examination may take it in May 2005, 2006, or 2007. Those who pass can achieve board certification by either successfully completing the current Phase III examination in 2006, 2007, or 2008 or accepting the Gateway Offer as described above (Figures, blocks 3, 4, and 7).

CERTIFICATION-RECERTIFICATION FOR NEW GRADUATES

For several years, the board has considered whether to certify orthodontists when they graduate from an accredited school (Figure, block 10). To explore this early certification concept, the ABO initiated the Resident Clinical Outcomes Study (also called the pilot study) in 2001.⁵ In summer 2002, 16 American orthodontic programs accredited by the Commission on Dental Accreditation agreed to participate in the pilot study. The purpose of the project was to evaluate the efficacy of offering early certification to recent orthodontic graduates by using cases treated in their residencies. The pilot study cases will be evaluated in February 2006, and the final results will be reported in autumn 2006.

The results of the pilot study and input from educators will provide information that will be used for determination of the details for the new Phase III initial certification examination, which will be offered beginning in 2007. This examination will involve the presentation of cases treated in residency programs and evaluated according to ABO standards. Treatment must be initiated and completed by the recent graduate undergoing the examination. A 10-year time-limited certificate will be issued upon successful completion of the Phase II written examination and the Phase III initial certification examination.

The board envisions the following benefits accruing from the Phase III initial certification examination:

1. It will encourage orthodontists to become certified early in their careers and will require periodic reexaminations to maintain certification. This will potentially maximize the quality of orthodontic care by instilling motivation for self assessment.
2. Board certification will become the norm rather than the exception and will serve as a means for continuous quality assessment. In the process, our dental colleagues and the public will be able to trust

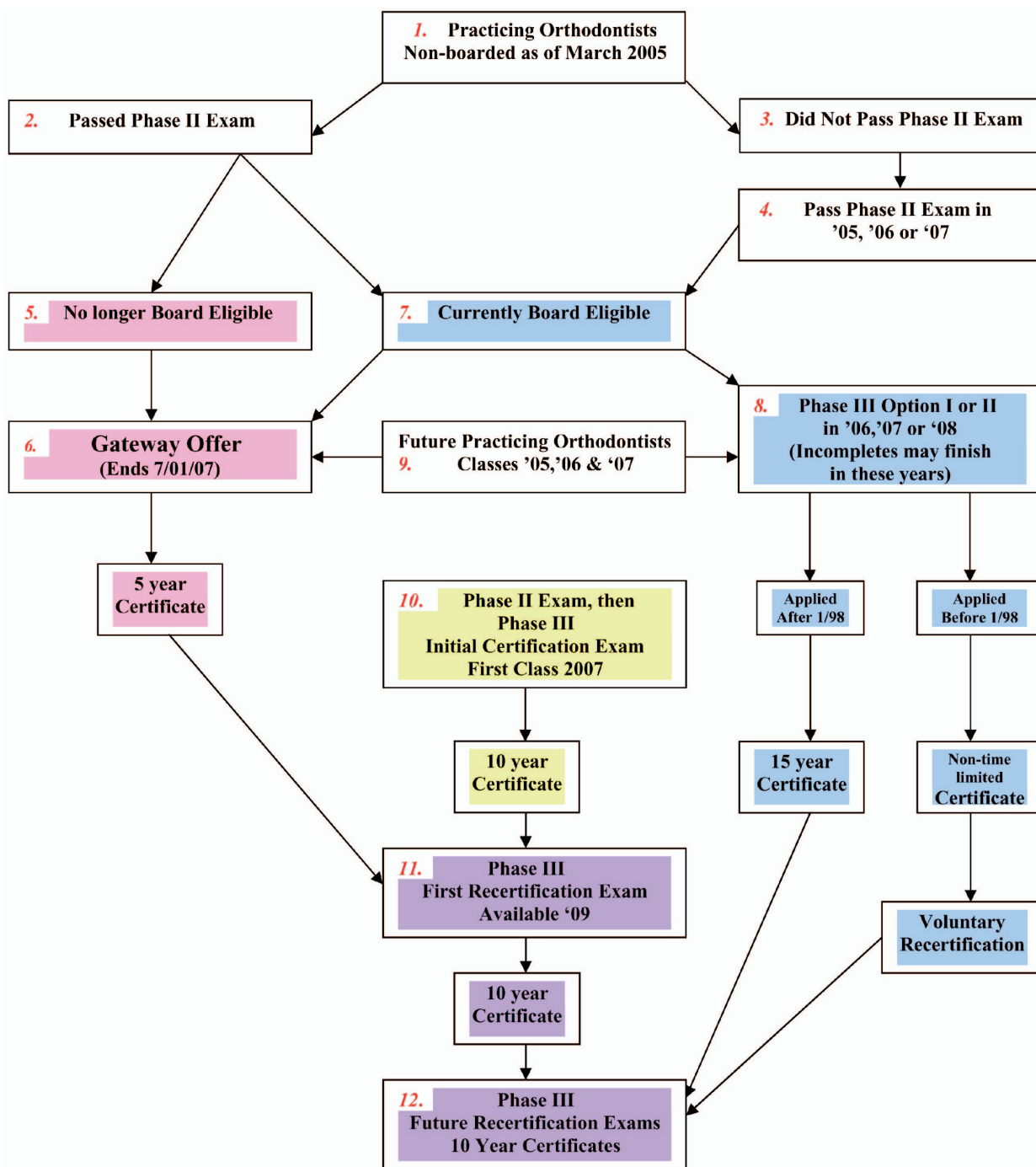


Fig. Transition to new process for ABO certification. Red numbers correspond to citations in text.

the system to provide information pertaining to the continued competency of orthodontists.

- Orthodontic educational programs could use the Phase III initial certification examination as an objective external outcomes measure⁶ for evaluating their clinical curricula. This Phase III examination,

combined with the Phase II examination for evaluating the didactic aspect of the orthodontic educational system, could yield a standardized North American testing system that objectively evaluates the resident training process, thus fulfilling one of the main original objectives of the ABO's founding directors.²

PERIODIC REEXAMINATION (RECERTIFICATION)

All dental and most medical specialties now require recertification throughout a practitioner's career. In 1998, the ABO established a policy that all future certificates have a time limit of 15 years. Periodic reexamination is therefore the foundation of the new premise for board certification. The concept of reexamination for board certification was discussed in detail in December 2004.⁷

The ABO will establish the reexamination (recertification) component of the new board certification process as follows:

- I. Phase III first recertification examination (Figure, block 11):
 - A. Timing of the examination. The Phase III first recertification examination will be available by 2009 for diplomates choosing the Gateway Offer. If the examination is completed before the expiration date of certification, the unexpired time will be added to the recertification period.
 - B. Examination requirements.
 1. Board case review oral examination (BCROE)⁸ comprising cases presented to the candidate for diagnosis, treatment planning, and discussion with examiners.
 2. Diplomate case presentation with oral review (CCROE),⁴ with a combination of the discrepancy index (DI)⁹ and case category requirements as follows:
 - a) Three cases with a DI of at least 10 and 3 cases with a DI of at least 20.
 - b) No more than 1 case treated with orthognathic surgery.
 - c) At least 1 case treated with 4 quadrant extractions.
 - d) At least 1 case with a bilateral or unilateral full-step Class II malocclusion corrected to a Class I molar and canine relationship.
 - C. Length of certification. The diplomate will be awarded a 10-year certificate upon successful completion of the Phase III first recertification.
- II. Future Phase III recertification examinations (Figure, block 12). Specific details of subsequent recertification examinations have not been delineated. However, the current board will recommend less involved recertification examinations. The ABO is currently field-testing different forms of recertification, including computer-based case reviews. Totally computer-based case reviews could ultimately

be a viable option in the recertification process. Because future examinations will occur in 2020 and beyond, the current board will relegate these decisions to future boards.

SUMMARY

Efforts during the past 75 years have achieved only modest success in engaging orthodontists in certification, despite the many avenues to do so. The board has decided that the time for change is now and is undertaking what the directors believe are reasonable steps to reinvigorate the process while upholding the ABO's historically high standards. Whether case presentation is accomplished at the beginning or near the end of an orthodontist's career, the board's standards of encouraging clinical excellence will prevail. There will be no diminution in the ABO's primary objective of the pursuit of excellence in orthodontics.

This article described changes in the process of board certification that will allow all orthodontists, now and in the future, to become certified and continue to demonstrate their competency through recertification. We believe the new model will both enhance the quality of orthodontic education and elevate the level of care for the public we serve.

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