

Medicine's 'Big Lie'

While today “The Big Lie” mainly refers to the actions of the prior President, an older and bigger lie that has a real effect on every American is one perpetrated by our very own health care conglomerate. Americans pay the highest rates for health care on the planet; health care consumes about 17% of our gross domestic product.¹ If we got higher-quality care, faster services, longer lives, or even greater consumer happiness, paying those rates might be worth it. But we don't.

Worse yet is the idea that “board certification” assures the public that the doctor from whom they receive/purchase care is of a higher quality than one who is not so credentialed. That is our “Big Lie!” For decades, the public has been told that they should seek out board-certified doctors. Doctors in training have been told they must get board-certified. Hospitals brag about employing only board-certified doctors, insurers sometimes mandate board certification for a doctor to get paid, and employers use board certification as a benchmark for hiring and as a factor in compensation.

The sacred secret is that board certification makes no difference. There is no substantial evidence in any branch of medicine that doctors who are board-certified are better. There is no evidence that board-certified doctors get their

patients healthier with more frequency, faster, less expensively, or with fewer medical errors than other doctors. The reality is that board certification is a sham. It's a certificate granted after taking a very expensive test, and it is now part of an industry that is misleading the public and harming the trust the medical profession had once earned. Board certification is the equivalent of a diploma mill or an online certificate in any other field.

Why has this been kept under wraps for so long? Follow the money. The American Board of Medical Specialties (ABMS) oversees 24 specialty boards and reported revenue of \$22.2M and expenses of \$19.3M on its 2019 IRS Form 990.² They make profit every year. But, looking further, these “not-for-profit” educational entities are sitting on hundreds of millions of dollars in their “foundations.” Take the American Board of Psychiatry and Neurology, for instance. They had more than \$140M in assets in 2019.³ How is this possible? Easy. They have misled the American public and been remarkably successful convincing other organizations, such as the Joint Commission, the Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education, and the National Committee for Quality Assurance, that board certification is an assurance of quality. They charge high fees to “candidates” for taking the computer-based test and have developed a system called maintenance of certification (MOC) that is onerous, expensive, and serves as an annuity that forces doctors to pay annually to keep their board certification.

Medicine is a science. In the practice of our discipline, we are expected to follow the science and to adhere to scientific principles. Yet there is

neither scientific proof nor good evidence that board certification means anything in terms of competence, safety to the public, or quality of care. Doctors favor life-long learning, and continuing education has long been the standard and should remain so, not board certification or MOC. The mandatory continuing education required in every state to maintain a medical license is sufficient to prove doctors are current in their field of practice and to protect the public.

It is time for the medical community to admit that the emperor wears no clothes, and demand that the money grab of the ABMS and its affiliates be halted. This would result in greater access to care for patients and would reduce the cost of medical care, as the hundreds of millions being “stolen” from doctors today—costs that get passed on to patients—could be recouped and used for treating patients who clearly are in need and are being forgotten as the medical-industrial complex continues to flex its muscles and ensnare more of our national budget in its tentacles.

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