



Board Eligible or Board Qualified, Not!!

Dear Colleagues,

How often have one of us congratulated a candidate because they just passed “the qualifier” and we’ve then told them, great – “now you are board eligible” or “now you are board qualified”. The problem is, on several levels, neither term is correct and neither phrase should be used, by us or by our residents. The reason is to prevent misleading the public about their credentials, but also reflects the actual names of the examinations.

The two ACVIM examinations for candidates were renamed almost 20 years ago. The first examination, which is a test of general internal medicine that all ACVIM Diplomates should be able to demonstrate, regardless of specialty, is now the **General Examination**. Its name was changed when that examination was unlinked from taking the second examination. You no longer have to pass the General Examination in order to take the second examination; although you must pass it in order to become board certified. So, the first examination no longer “qualifies” you to take the second examination, therefore it is no longer the **Qualifying exam**.

The second examination, which used to be titled the **Certifying Examination**, is now the **Specialty Examination**. This is a test of the in-depth knowledge of your particular specialty. This test’s name was changed because the two examinations were unlinked from each other, as well as from the remaining steps in the credentialing process, such as publication requirements. So, now a candidate can pass the specialty examination before they pass the general examination and, likewise, can pass both examinations before they complete other specific requirements, such as publications.

In other words, at one time, ACVIM had a lock-step credentialing process with a rigid set of steps that had to be completed in a specific order. So, at that time, the names accurately reflected your status. When the steps were linked, the first step was the Qualifying examination, which qualified you to move on to the next steps. You could not take the final (Certifying) examination until every other component of credentialing had been completed. So the second examination was truly the Certifying examination and, once it was passed, you became a diplomate. Neither is true any longer. In fact, it is possible to pass both examinations and, because you have not completed the remainder of the credentials required for board certification, still not be Board Certified.

Because of those changes in our process (as well as the process in other specialty colleges), the American Board of Veterinary Specialties determined that using the terms Board Eligible or Board Qualified when a candidate has simply completed one or two examinations creates a misperception in the minds of the public. Use of those terms suggest that a candidate has finished all of his or her credentials and are only awaiting the arrival of their final certificate.

That perception is not true since; once a candidate has completed all their credentials they are immediately granted specialty status and can begin calling themselves Board Certified, even prior to the physical arrival of the actual certificate. If a candidate has not completed all requirements for credentialing, they are not Board Qualified or Board Eligible either one. Or, to quote the ABVS Policy, “one is either board certified or not.” There is no gray zone.

Both the AVMA Principles of Veterinary Ethics and the American Board of Veterinary Specialties Policy Manual are quite clear: It is unethical for veterinarians to identify themselves as members of an AVMA-recognized specialty organization if such certification has not been awarded. Only those who are board certified may claim that status. Only those veterinarians who have been certified by an AVMA-recognized specialty organization should refer to themselves as specialists.

In the opinion of the AVMA and the ABVS both the terms “board eligible” or “board qualified” are misleading and should not be used by any veterinarian. One is either board certified, having met all of the criteria of a particular specialty college or board, or one has no board credentials.

I hope this background is helpful to you when you talk to your residents and guide them on how to present their credentials as they pend completion of their certification. To help them with their questions, advise them that they should either call themselves “Residency Trained in” or “Practice Limited to”. Each of those descriptions is both accurate and ethical.

Simply put, when we congratulate our residents on becoming “Board Eligible” or “Board Qualified”, we are actually contributing to the dilemma we face as a specialty when we ask for more appropriate recognition of our status. Or, in the immortal words of Pogo “We have met the enemy, and he is us”.

Sincerely,

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