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A cheatin' doctor

Anyone who has been to a doctor's office has spent time waiting in an exam room. Many people, perhaps bored with 3-year-old copies of *Ladies' Home Journal*, have undoubtedly perused the doctor's "wall of fame," the most important component of which is usually framed certificates indicating that the doctor is "board certified." The average patient could be excused for believing that these "board certifications" mean that the physician has demonstrated, through a valid testing process, proficiency and knowledge in a specialty. But reports by CNN, however, say that this belief may not always be accurate.

The American Board of Medical Specialties (ABMS) says medical specialty certification is a voluntary process that is supposed to demonstrate a physician's "exceptional expertise" in a particular specialty. Obtaining a medical license demonstrates only minimum competency to diagnose and treat patients generally, but a license is not specific to any particular specialty. Board certification in a specialty, the ABMS says, is awarded only after a "rigorous process of testing and peer evaluation."

As CNN reported in January, however, doctors have been cheating on the radiology exam for years by memorizing test questions provided by radiology residents who already took the test. These questions and answers, known as "recalls," are compiled by residents who sit down as soon as they can after the test is over and write down every question they can remember. The questions and answers are gathered together in sophisticated banks and shared among radiology residency programs.

The president of the ABMS, which oversees numerous medical specialty and subspecialty boards, told CNN that he is not aware of cheating through the use of recalls outside of the radiology exam. Later in January, CNN

reported that dermatology residents have also pass memorized test questions to their colleagues. Dermatologists refer to the compilations as "airplane notes," in a nod to the practice of writing down questions and answers as a candidate flies home after the exam.

The practice came to light after an anonymous e-mail sent to the American Board of Dermatology in 2008 described an "organized effort year after year" to compile every question on the dermatology exam and distribute them to residency programs across the country. The e-mail described "an almost ceremonial meeting" of residents in a hotel in Chicago, moments after taking the test, at which they "feverishly" attempt to write down every question on the test they had just taken.

Dr. Gary Becker, the executive director of the American Board of Radiology (ABR), the board that administers the radiology exam, said collecting or using "recalls" is cheating.

On Jan. 6, the ABR issued a statement titled "ABR's Exam Security." In its statement, the board acknowledged that "... recalled test questions (recalls) have been passed around and used not only to guide study, but at least by some to memorize exact test questions and answer options ..." The ABR says the latter situation violates ABR rules and constitutes cheating. There is a clear disconnect between the ABR and practicing radiologists and residency programs, however.

To many residents and radiologists, the use of recalls is not black and white. As Dr. Joseph Dieber told CNN, cheating would entail photographing the questions and answers and memorizing them. Using recalls based on memory, he reasoned, is a "gray area."

Some practicing radiologists justify the use of recalls based on the nature of the exam itself. Dieber complains that some of the ques-

tions are so obscure that a candidate would never prepare for them if he did not already know the questions that had been asked. Others do not think it's cheating. Dr. Anne Silas, the head of the radiology department at Dartmouth, told CNN that, though not officially condoned, recalls have been used in Dartmouth's residency program as study guides.

It's hard to say what's more troubling; that cheating is common or that some radiologists rationalize and justify it. No examination can test the entire breadth of knowledge necessary to practice in a profession or specialty. The perhaps naive assumption is that when faced with a test of an unknown sample of material, a candidate will learn all of the subject matter, knowing that he or she could see any of it on a test. The ability to determine what will be on the test allows a resident to ignore other material, which defeats the purpose.

Arguments that the test itself is flawed by asking questions on picayune or irrelevant material may well have merit. But the tendency to use that flaw to justify cheating raises troubling questions. If cheating is not black and white on the board certification exam, where else might integrity be sacrificed at the altar of necessity? As the American College of Radiology stated, cheating on the board certification exam "... smears the entire specialty with a broad and unjustified brush."

Under Illinois law, the fact that a doctor failed his board certification exam is generally not admissible unless he gives expert testimony. Most lawyers will enquire of defendant doctors and retained experts whether they passed their exams on the first try. Perhaps now it's fair game to ask if the doctor used "recalls" or "airplane notes" to prepare. ■

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