

WHAT'S BEHIND THE "DR."?

Not just anyone can call themselves a dentist – it takes years of training and education to earn the right to practise dentistry in Canada

BY DONNA PARIS

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When you visit a dentist, do you ever wonder about his or her qualifications? Dentists are doctors of the mouth and the only dental professionals that are qualified to diagnose and treat dental disease in Canada, says Dr. Charles Shuler, Dean of the Faculty of Dentistry at UBC. "The only way you can be legally registered in Canada is to have graduated from a dental school and passed the National Dental Examining Board (NDEB) of Canada exams," says Dr. Shuler.

To practise dentistry or call yourself a dentist or a dental specialist, you must be licensed by a provincial or territorial regulatory body. And it's not easy.

There are 10 dental schools in Canada. To apply, a student usually needs to complete a four-year bachelor's degree, and undergo a formal application process which may include taking the Dental Aptitude Test (DAT) and a formal review. Dental school takes four years to complete, then students can write the examination to receive a NDEB Certificate. Before starting to practise, a graduating dental student may elect to do a one-year dental practice residency.

For specialists, such as periodontists, the road to accreditation involves two to six more years of education after successful completion of a dental undergraduate program. They must then pass the National Dental Specialty Examination through the Royal College of Dentists of Canada as part of their requirement for licensure as a dental specialist.

In 2013, there were 341 eligible applicants with 48 being selected for the UBC dental school undergraduate program, says Dr. Tim Gould, a periodontist and co-director of member services at the British Columbia Dental Association (BCDA). And dental school isn't cheap, either. "It involves a considerable financial commitment," says Dr. Gould. Fees at UBC total \$218,000 for the four years, with living expenses on top of that.

By a reciprocal agreement, dentists graduating from an accredited

dental school in the United States, Australia, Ireland and New Zealand can practise in Canada without further examination as standards between these countries are equivalent, says Dr. Shuler. Dentists trained in other countries must successfully complete a qualifying or degree program at a Canadian dental school, or complete the Equivalency Process offered by the NDEB. All dentists, regardless of where they are trained, must pass this national exam to be able to obtain a license in any province or territory. "Not every country has a process of accreditation," says Dr. Shuler, "and there is a wide divergence in the quality of education."

How does a patient know that a BC dentist is qualified? Check with the College of Dental Surgeons of BC (CDSBC). All dentists practising in BC must be licensed by CDSBC. In order to receive a license they must have passed all the necessary requirements to practise dentistry in this province. "A directory of licensed dentists is public information and can be found on the College's website (cadsbc.org)," advises Dr. Shuler.

The licensing process is the same across Canada and every provincial dental college lists registered dentists on its website, says Dr. Bruce Ward, spokesperson for the British Columbia Dental Association's (BCDA) public education program. If patients are looking for a licensed dentist accepting new patients they can also visit the BCDA's website (yourdentalhealth.ca).

In BC, there are also ongoing requirements for license renewal. These include 90 hours of continuing dental education credits over a three-year period, and 900 hours of continuous practice over the previous three years. "It's vitally important that dentists maintain competence by undertaking continuous learning and professional development, and for patients to ask about qualifications and confirm their dentist is licensed if they have any doubt," says Dr. Gould. ♦