

Time to regulate ambiguous dental qualifications

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Dentistry is fundamentally a trust-based profession. Patients often lack technical knowledge to evaluate a dentist's credentials themselves, and often assume that all advertised titles are officially recognised. — NSTP FILE PIC

AS a dental professional dedicated to ethical care and transparency, I am increasingly concerned about a troubling trend: the increasing use of ambiguous qualifications, memberships and certifications by certain dental practitioners in Malaysia.

These credentials, often displayed on websites and social media platforms, while legitimate in their own right, may mislead the public into assuming that a dentist possesses advanced training and certification when that is not the case.

While the qualifications may reflect continued learning or affiliations, they often include fellowships, memberships and certifications from organisations, associations or academies that are not recognised by the Malaysian Dental Council (MDC).

In a profession that relies heavily on public trust, clarity in the presentation of these qualifications is not merely a matter of pride — it is a fundamental professional responsibility.

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The MDC's Code of Professional Conduct published in 2022 along with the Dental Act 2018 (Act 804) provides explicit guidance on this matter:

Only qualifications that are recognised and registrable with the MDC may be publicly displayed. Dentists who are not listed on the MDC's Dental Specialist Register are prohibited from referring to themselves as specialists or using titles that imply specialist expertise.

These guidelines are not optional. They are designed to safeguard patients and uphold the integrity of the dental profession.

Dentistry is fundamentally a trust-based profession. Patients often lack technical knowledge to evaluate a dentist's credentials themselves, and often assume that all advertised titles are officially recognised.

Allowing unregulated or ambiguous qualifications to be displayed on signages or digital platforms jeopardises informed consent and undermines the integrity of formally trained specialists who have undergone rigorous and accredited training.

Most, if not all dental practitioners strive to uphold ethical standards in their practice. However, there is a notable absence of consistent and visible guidance and enforcement.

Thus, I propose that the MDC consider the following measures:

1. Publish and publicise a list of recognised qualifications to assist both practitioners and the public in distinguishing what is formally accepted;
2. Provide clearer guidelines on how the display of non-registrable credentials (fellowships, certifications, etc) along with appropriate disclaimers;
3. Review clinic signages and digital platforms for potentially misleading titles; and
4. Establish a public portal to verify whether a practitioner is a general dentist or a registered specialist.

Implementing these measures would not only safeguard patients but also support ethical practitioners who wish to present their credentials accurately and transparently.

We owe it to our patients, colleagues and the reputation of our profession to ensure clarity, compliance and integrity at all times.

ASSOC PROF DR AHMAD FAISAL ISMAIL

Deputy Dean, Kulliyyah of Dentistry,

International Islamic University Malaysia

*The views expressed in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect those of the New Straits Times



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