

Perspectives

The following perspective was received from Dr. Simonsen, for which a corresponding response was made by Dr. Dickerson.

DELUSIONS OF GRANDEUR, OR WHAT THE PUBLIC DOESN'T KNOW ABOUT SHORTCUTS

There it was—a full-page advertisement appearing in the *ADA News* for the past few months (September–November 2004). The degrees were listed after a dentist's name: DDS, FAACD, LVIM. Twelve letters conveying, one would expect, many, many years of study, tears, toil, and sweat that the dentist had put forth, giving him the right to place these professional accolades after his name. Or was I mistaken?

Our dental world is changing, and not always for the better. With the increasing acceptance of advertising that tests our sensibilities comes the temptation for colleagues to make themselves appear better than each other, frequently in ways that some would call unethical. Despite this trend, the dental profession still has a great deal of autonomy. That autonomy comes from decades of *earned* public trust. When that trust begins to weaken or crumble, so will the professional autonomy that we so cherish. Look at the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, and the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act, just two recent examples of legislated rules and regulations that can be said to have

come, at least in part, from diminishing public trust in the belief that the health care professions are capable of policing themselves in a manner that protects the public interest.

The American Dental Association Principles of Ethics and Code of Professional Conduct states, “Generally, unearned or nonhealth degrees and fellowships that designate association, rather than attainment, should be limited to scientific papers and curriculum vitae.”¹ You can find it under Section V, titled “Veracity.” And it explains further that “an unearned academic degree is one which is awarded by an educational institution not accredited by a generally recognized accrediting body or is an honorary degree.”

So what is this DDS, FAACD, LVIM all about, I wondered?

DDS: Well that's straightforward enough. That's the DDS degree, an *earned* doctorate in dentistry—the equivalent of the DMD degree. All dentists who graduate from an accredited US dental school earn either the DDS or the DMD degree. It comes after four years (or, as in

the case of just one outstanding US dental school, three years) of full-time hard labor.

FAACD: Well, for sure, that's not an earned degree. It is a fellowship in an organization that markets cosmetic dentistry. The letters FAACD, “designate association, rather than attainment” and, as such, “should be limited to scientific papers and curriculum vitae.” Frequently, however, dentists who wish to infer that they are superior to colleagues with just a DDS or a DMD degree will flaunt letters representing unearned degrees or associations in many arenas beyond those accepted by the Principles of Ethics.

LVIM: Now, what is that? I was really stumped on this one and had to do some legwork to find out more about this unearned “degree.” LVI gave me a clue, but surely an unaccredited institute could not be awarding degrees? Of course, I am sure most of us get a couple of e-mails a month offering degrees for sale, but in an honorable health



care profession, in which the public trust rewards us all with a great degree of autonomy, we surely could not be selling degrees like mail-order charlatans?

According to the Las Vegas Institute (LVI) Web site, LVIM is apparently a credential in "Aesthetic Neuromuscular Mastership." So perhaps using LVIM instead of ANM for this "mastership" is part of the master branding strategy for LVI? Using the letter M, usually reserved for a master's postgraduate degree, is likely to mislead, inasmuch as attaining a legitimate master's degree usually requires 2 to 4 years of full-time study at an accredited institution of higher learning. While the profession accepts that certain stringent requirements for attainment of postgraduate education certificates (such as the MAGD) are legitimate, it is hard for me to believe that the profession as a whole will accept that an unaccredited, self-proclaimed "academic" institute can start to give out "master's degrees" for attendance at a few courses taught by "faculty" who have not earned any legitimate postgraduate degrees (although, of course, they have conferred the LVIM on some of their "faculty"). It's like general dentists comprising the complete faculty of a dental school graduate program.

Here's what the Las Vegas Institute Web site says about LVIM:

Due to the extensive marketing campaigns by LVI, we have also

begun to create public awareness of this fact [that their "graduates" are superior]. It won't be long until "LVIM" after the name of a doctor will indicate superior training and skills to the public. As our efforts to educate the public about neuromuscular dentistry continues [sic], so will their demand for competent restorative neuromuscular dentists.²

Well, LVI's branding and marketing strategy may well lead to confusion of what constitutes "superior training and skills" by the lay public, but to me it indicates a shortcut into the realm of the dental specialist, the prosthodontist. Although LVI may not claim that LVIM is a degree, it sure promotes that LVIM be placed after the earned dental degree—to look like a dental master's graduate degree. In my opinion, this is part of an attempt to justify marginally necessary, or even unnecessary, treatment of the public by inadequately trained colleagues with unaccredited qualifications.

I guess there are only six people in the world with the LVIM "degree," unless LVI has "graduated" some "classes" since listing "faculty" on their Web site. The LVI Web site shows six of their instructors with LVIM letters after their names who apparently feel ready to promote their superiority to the public.

Again, from the LVI Web site: "LVI also has embarked on a North

American PR campaign to educate the public about the life-changing benefits of neuromuscular dentistry. Our goal is to educate the public..." Rather than education, it seems to me that obfuscation and co-option may be the goals. In the section on the Web site for consumers, an FAQ about how to pay for the full-mouth reconstruction notes that "Most LVI dentists... will make the payment fit comfortably into your monthly budget. (Like a new car except that it will last longer!)" Is that the payments or the reconstruction that will last longer? What they don't say is that frequently charges for a full-mouth reconstruction are much more than most people pay for a new car, and there is no evidence that their particular treatment will last longer than a car.

It is interesting that in the full list of their "faculty" the LVI does not list even one individual (out of 29) with a bona fide advanced degree (eg, MS, MPH, MEd, PhD) after the dental degree.² I guess if you don't have a legitimate postdoctoral degree, you just invent one, or pile on all the fellowships you have, to massage feelings of inadequacy.

We are in the clutches of a monster—progressive lunacy we could call it. An unaccredited "institute" claiming to be the "world's premier postgraduate center for cosmetic dentistry" is soliciting dentists to take continuing-education courses that are wrapped in hard-earned university diction

(they have “faculty” who participate in the “LVI Faculty Practice,” and they have “graduates” and “graduation ceremonies,” and they have “alumni”). All of these terms are legitimately the purview of accredited universities and dental schools. This institute has now embarked on a master plan of selling the public with prime-time advertising (on programs such as *Extreme Makeover*, and I have seen commercials during *Larry King Live* and *Wolf Blitzer Reports*) to convince the public to contact its “alumni.” And so the circle is complete—sell the courses that sell the dentists to sell the public who see the commercials to see the dentists who bought the courses.

If we in the profession cannot control our own standards of ethical behavior, others will come in and do it for us. If a group within the

profession is seen as misleading the public, and recommending massive irreversible treatments such as full-mouth reconstruction for inadequately informed patients based on pseudoscientific evidence performed by general dentists lacking specialty training in prosthodontics, it is time for the profession to react before Big Brother does.

To potential LVIM wannabees, I say, if you want an advanced degree, spend 2 or 3 years to get a legitimate degree from an accredited university. If you want to do the work of a prosthodontist, get the training from a program at an accredited institution where, by the way, you will find that your teachers are mostly specialists with multiple degrees.

Taking a shortcut to expertise can only result in disaster for the indi-

vidual and the profession that permits it. Let's hope the LVIM “degree” will disappear as quickly as it has reared its ugly head.



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REFERENCES

1. American Dental Association. Available at: http://www.ada.org/prof/prac/law/code/principles_rep5f3.asp (accessed December 8, 2004).
2. Las Vegas Institute. Available at: <http://www.lvilive.com/mastership.html> (accessed December 8, 2004).

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RESPONSE TO PERSPECTIVES

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to explain what it takes to obtain the LVIM. It is not surprising that people would not know what we are all about if they had never visited the five-acre, 60,000-square-foot, state-of-the-art campus or called me or anyone at LVI to explain their “concerns.” The LVI curriculum involves more than just esthetics as we have over 35 courses spanning the range of esthetics, occlusion, endodontics,

periodontics, orthodontics, management, hygiene, implants, removable prosthodontics, emergency medicine, and others. After 10 years of offering dentists superior postgraduate education, LVI decided to validate those who have had extensive training in the area of comprehensive restorative esthetics and occlusion. Instead of just having the course requirements, as for the AGD, those achieving their LVI mastership are required to demonstrate their skills by completing live-patient

treatment programs, presenting cases, and taking a comprehensive test to prove clinical expertise.

Many members of our profession accept that postgraduate certificates such as the MAGD are legitimate and endorse their designation. The requirements for MAGD are as follows. First, candidates must achieve fellowship by completing 500 hours of approved continuing education, with at least 350 of those hours earned in participation course

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