An Outsider Looking In

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I was lucky enough to be able to attend the recent American Board of Medical Specialties (ABMS) Conference 2017 in Chicago as a poster presenter. The poster used the geriatric patient as a focus to address cross-cutting issues relevant to multiple specialties through a joint project involving the American Geriatric Society and ABMS. I do not represent a society or sit on any society boards. I am simply a Board Certified General and Vascular Surgeon who took this unique opportunity to learn about my Board Certifications in a new light, network, and expand my knowledge about what these certifying boards do on a collective basis.

Given the recent issues with Maintenance of Certification (MOC) and turf battles within my own specialties, I approached the meeting with caution. However, to say that I was pleasantly surprised is an understatement. The ABMS staff is to be commended for a top notch program that rivals any major meeting I have attended. The venue and support, with a special mention of the phone-based app, were outstanding.

So what did I learn and what did I bring home? First and foremost, the meeting reaffirmed that Board Certification is important. As background, I have been a Chief of Surgery, Regional Chief Surgical Consultant, and Acting Regional Chief Medical Officer within the largest integrated health care system in the nation: the Veterans Affairs. I have seen firsthand and had to deal with the issue of board eligible versus Board Certified. It is important to note that data presented in the sessions supported my impression that physicians obtaining and maintaining Board Certification have a disciplinary event rate much lower than those who never passed their boards or lingered in the eligible category. My second impression from the meeting surrounds the issue of MOC. It is heartening to know that ABMS and its Member Boards are listening to their constituents. Presentations and discussions of upcoming MOC changes gave this novice renewed faith that sound minds were looking for a productive way forward based on the positive experiences of various specialties that have “figured it out.”

Most significantly, I saw an organization whose focus is on making improvements for the most important person of all - the patient. Given my positions, I have always believed that ensuring outcomes and providing value is the core of what we do within our given specialties. It was a pleasure to see the amount of attention at ABMS given to registry outcomes and development as well as quality improvement (QI) projects. The registry and QI sessions gave me a glimpse at what varying specialties were focusing on as QI projects and what they considered important outcome measures for their societies. The strength of ABMS and the lure of the meeting was the ability to bring together the varying and disparate specialties for true cross-cutting topics that otherwise have the potential to get stuck in silos within a given specialty. This cross pollination among medical specialties is a unique experience that I have been lucky enough to see in the Geriatric realm and I am encouraged to see it occurring at ABMS. Kudos for creating a great meeting.

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