

ABVS FAQ

11/12/19

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WHAT IS THE PROCESS TO BECOME BOARD-CERTIFIED?

An individual who is board-certified in a veterinary specialty has graduated from a veterinary school followed by several years of advanced training and/or experience in a specialized field of veterinary medicine. Board-certification is awarded if, or when, the individual demonstrates an advanced level of knowledge and skill by successfully passing a certification examination developed and administered by an AVMA-Recognized Veterinary Specialty Organization.

WHAT SCHOOLING/TRAINING IS REQUIRED FOR A VETERINARIAN TO BECOME A SPECIALIST?

Each AVMA-Recognized Veterinary Specialty Organization (RVSO) develops its own training requirements that need to be met before an individual can be eligible to attempt the certification examination. The most common pathway for a veterinarian to become eligible to take a certification examination in a veterinary specialty is through the completion of an internship (usually one year) followed by completion of a residency training program (usually two to three years) under the supervision of veterinarians who are board-certified in that specialty. However, there are some exceptions. Some RVSOs will accept several years of veterinary practice experience in lieu of an internship and at least one RVSO (the American Board of Veterinary Practitioners) accepts extensive practice experience with a certain species to become eligible to examine for certification as a specialist with that species.

WHAT OTHER REQUIREMENTS ARE THERE TO BECOME A SPECIALIST?

Each AVMA-Recognized Veterinary Specialty Organization (RVSO) develops its own requirements that need to be met before an individual can be eligible to attempt the certification examination. Many RVSOs not only require extensive training under supervision of veterinarians who are board-certified in that specialty but may also require some training in related areas of veterinary medicine to ensure a comprehensive knowledge of closely related areas of veterinary medicine. For example, to become board-certified in veterinary surgery, an individual must also complete at least 80 hours of training with

a board-certified veterinary anesthesiologist, at least 80 hours with a board-certified veterinary radiologist, at least 80 hours with a board-certified veterinary internal medicine specialist, and at least 80 hours with a board-certified veterinary pathologist during the three or more years of a veterinary surgical residency.

RVSOs may stipulate other requirements as well before an individual's credentials are accepted for examination for certification. For example, many RVSOs require that the individual complete a unique research project or clinical study and successfully publish those results before the individual can be considered for examination. It is also common for an individual to be required to attend courses or conferences offering advanced lectures or technique laboratories.

WHAT KIND OF EXAMINATION IS REQUIRED BEFORE A VETERINARIAN CAN BECOME BOARD-CERTIFIED?

All AVMA-Recognized Veterinary Specialty Organizations (RVSOs) administer examinations that are developed and based upon the results of a job/task analysis of experts in that specialized field of veterinary medicine. The blueprint and content of the examination is a direct reflection of the knowledge and skills used by board-certified experts during their practice of that field of specialized veterinary medicine. The actual format of the examination varies between different RVSOs and may include multiple choice, written, oral, or practical exams or, more commonly, some combination of formats and typically are administered over a two- to three-day period.

WHERE WOULD A VETERINARIAN GO TO SCHOOL TO BECOME A SPECIALIST?

Although most of the AVMA-Recognized Veterinary Specialty Organizations have the word 'college' in their name (i.e., American College of Veterinary Dermatology, etc.), they are not colleges in the traditional, brick and mortar, sense. Rather they are 'colleges' in that they define the educational requirements to become a specialist and administer the examinations to verify that candidates have achieved those requirements. Many internships and residency programs are located at university veterinary teaching hospitals. There are also many internships and residency programs that are at private practice specialty clinics and hospitals that are not affiliated with universities.

WHAT DEGREE IS RECEIVED?

Individuals that have successfully passed a board-certification examination of one of these RVSO's are said to be 'Diplomates' although no academic degree is awarded. Individuals who have achieved board-certification in a specialty identify themselves as Diplomates of that specialty. For example, an individual might have following their name: Diplomate, American College of Veterinary Anesthesiology or Dip, ACVA or simply DACVA.

However, 'Diplomate' is not a title that can be copy-righted and therefore there is no legal restriction on organizations that are not AVMA-Recognized Veterinary Specialty Organizations awarding the same designation. It is, however, against AVMA policy for veterinarians who are not board-certified by one of the AVMA-Recognized Veterinary Specialty Organizations to represent themselves as specialists and, in fact, doing so would be against many state laws governing the practice of veterinary medicine.

WHY WOULD A VETERINARIAN WANT TO BECOME A SPECIALIST?

There is no one answer as to why individuals pursue board-certification in a veterinary specialty. Some are motivated by the desire to be on the leading edge of the practice of veterinary medicine, others may be pursuing jobs in academia or private industry where specialty certification might be a requirement.

WHAT ARE THE DIFFERENT SPECIALTIES?

There are 22 different AVMA-Recognized Veterinary Specialty Organizations; some of these are comprised of two or more related specialties. For example, the American College of Veterinary Internal Medicine includes specialties in not only in internal medicine, but also in cardiology, neurology, and oncology.

See the list of AVMA-Recognized Veterinary Specialty Organizations.

HOW ARE SPECIALISTS IMPORTANT TO THE PROFESSION?

Specialists perform an important role in the continuum of health care of animals in that they offer services, knowledge, and skills beyond that typically offered by veterinarians. Many times, specialists may be contributing to cases seen by your veterinarian. This may occur as a consultation with a specialist by your veterinarian during a puzzling or difficult case. Other times, specialists may be involved ‘behind the scenes’. For example, the person interpreting the number and appearance of blood cells on a sample sent to the lab may very well be board-certified by the American College of Veterinary Clinical Pathology. Likewise, Diplomates of the American College of Veterinary Microbiology may be interpreting bacterial cultures sent by your veterinarian.

Specialists perform many other important roles in the veterinary profession. The majority of teaching of veterinary students is done by veterinary specialists, and a significant amount of the continuing educational programs for veterinarians are presented by specialists. Veterinary specialists at university teaching hospitals also are often engaged in basic research and clinical trials which results in the continuing improvement in the level of care possible for animals.

HOW WOULD I FIND A VETERINARY SPECIALIST?

The most common way that clients find a specialist for their animals’ health issue is by referral to a specialist from their own veterinarian. Also, many of the AVMA-Recognized Veterinary Specialty Organizations maintain a searchable database of veterinarians who are board-certified in that specialty.

HOW DO I KNOW IF A VETERINARIAN IS A SPECIALIST?

Typically, veterinarians who are board-certified will indicate that either by explicitly stating “board-certified in veterinary dentistry (or veterinary radiology, etc.)” or by the designation of “Diplomate, American Veterinary Dental College” or “Dip, AVDC” or simply “DAVDC”.

Many of the AVMA-Recognized Veterinary Specialty Organizations maintain a searchable list of veterinarians who have been board-certified in that specialty.

To determine whether the AVMA recognizes a field as a veterinary specialty and/or an organization as a specialty organization, see the complete list of AVMA-recognized specialties and organizations.

The terms ‘specialist’ and ‘board-certified’ are used interchangeably to designate the same thing. The AVMA, and many state veterinary practice acts, limit the use of the term ‘specialist’ to those individuals who have been board-certified by one of the AVMA-Recognized Veterinary Specialty Organizations.

IS SPECIALIST THE SAME AS BOARD-CERTIFIED?

The terms ‘specialist’ and ‘board-certified’ are used interchangeably to designate the same thing. The AVMA, and many state veterinary practice acts, limit the use of the term ‘specialist’ to those individuals who have been board-certified by one of the AVMA-Recognized Veterinary Specialty Organizations.

WHAT IS A ‘DIPLOMATE’?

‘Diplomate’ is the designation given to individuals after board-certification by an organization.

IS ‘DIPLOMATE’ THE SAME AS ‘SPECIALIST’ OR ‘BOARD-CERTIFIED’?

In most instances, veterinarians with the designation of ‘Diplomate’ are specialists who have been board-certified by one of the AVMA-Recognized Veterinary Specialty Organizations. However, ‘Diplomate’ cannot be copy-righted or trademarked and there are some veterinarians who list the designation “Diplomate” in a field or through an organization that is not recognized as a veterinary specialty by the AVMA and thus would not be considered to be specialists by either the AVMA or many state veterinary practice acts.

HOW DO I KNOW IF A VETERINARY ORGANIZATION IS AN AVMA-RECOGNIZED VETERINARY SPECIALTY ORGANIZATION?

There are two ways to verify if a veterinary organization is recognized as a specialty by the AVMA. The first is that the organization should state prominently on its home web page that it is an AVMA-Recognized Veterinary Specialty Organization. The second is that the organization should be listed on the AVMA ABVS website.

I DON'T SEE OTOLARYNGOLOGY (OR LASER SURGERY, OR RHEUMATOLOGY, ETC.) ON THE LIST OF AVMA-RECOGNIZED VETERINARY SPECIALTIES – WHY NOT?

If a field of veterinary medicine is not listed on the AVMA ABVS website, it is not recognized as a specialty in veterinary medicine and veterinarians, even if they have some education in those disciplines, are not recognized as specialists.

WHAT CRITERIA ARE USED BY THE AVMA TO DETERMINE WHETHER A VETERINARY ORGANIZATION SHOULD BE RECOGNIZED AS A SPECIALTY ORGANIZATION IN THEIR FIELD OF VETERINARY MEDICINE?

There are a number of standards that an organization has to fulfill before the AVMA would consider recognition as a veterinary specialty, including standards regarding the training requirements and examination development and procedures of the organization. The field of veterinary medicine must have strong evidence (such as numerous high quality published articles) substantiating the basis for the field and enough people recognized as experts in that field to develop and administer board-certification examinations and to provide oversight for training programs. Lastly, comments are solicited from existing AVMA-Recognized Veterinary Specialty Organizations, related veterinary societies, and the public regarding the need for, and potential recognition of, the field of veterinary medicine as a specialty.

See more specific information regarding the standards used for AVMA recognition of veterinary specialty organizations or veterinary specialties.

WHAT IS THE AMERICAN BOARD OF VETERINARY SPECIALTIES (ABVS)?

The American Board of Veterinary Specialties (ABVS) is a committee of the AVMA that consists of 4 veterinarians who are board-certified by one of the 22 AVMA-Recognized Veterinary Specialty Organizations (RVSOs); four non-board-certified veterinarians appointed by the AVMA Board of Directors; a representative appointed by the AAVMC; a representative of the American Association of Veterinary State Boards; a psychometrician or person with expertise in certification; and a public member. The ABVS functions to set the standards those organizations must meet to be considered veterinary specialties and meets yearly to review the conformance to those standards by the RVSOs and to consider any petitions received by organizations seeking to be recognized as veterinary specialties.

HOW MANY VETERINARIANS ARE SPECIALISTS IN ONE OF THE AVMA-RECOGNIZED VETERINARY SPECIALTY ORGANIZATIONS?

As of December 2018, there are a little over 13,500 veterinarians who have been board-certified by one of the AVMA-Recognized Veterinary Specialty Organizations.

DOES A VETERINARIAN NEED TO BE A SPECIALIST TO PERFORM SURGICAL PROCEDURES (OR OPHTHALMOLOGICAL PROCEDURES, ETC.)?

No, graduates of AVMA-accredited veterinary schools have received a broad-based education and are not limited in the scope of their practice by any state laws, but rather by their own sense of their abilities and sense of obligation to their clients to offer the best solutions for their pets' healthcare.

IS A VETERINARIAN A SPECIALIST IF HE/SHE ADVERTISES AS "HAVING A SPECIAL INTEREST IN" SOME FACET OF VETERINARY MEDICINE?

No, veterinarians that advertise themselves as "having a special interest in surgery (or behavior problems, or cats, etc.)" should not be assumed to be board-certified in an AVMA-recognized veterinary specialty unless they also advertise that distinction.

CAN I ASSUME A VETERINARIAN IS A SPECIALIST IF HE/SHE HAS INITIALS BEHIND HIS/HER NAME IN ADDITION TO ‘DVM’?

No. There are numerous other initials that an individual might display in addition to their DVM degree, including other college degrees that the individual may have earned such as BA or BS, MS, PhD, JD, or MBA. As stated above, some organizations that are not recognized by the AVMA as veterinary specialties may award ‘certification’ by their own standards. Also confusing, some organizations award certificates to individuals attending continuing education (CE) seminars or passing an examination based upon successful completion of a course. Traditionally, receiving a certificate of attendance or participation is not associated with a designation to follow an individual’s name. However, confusion arises because individuals and/or the organizations awarding the certificates are unaware of the distinction between the certification process and the certificate process.

CAN I ASSUME A VETERINARIAN IS A SPECIALIST IF HE/SHE WORKS AT A ‘SPECIALTY PRACTICE’?

No, although veterinary clinics may identify themselves as specialty practices or offering specialty services, there are no regulations requiring that all veterinarians working there be specialists. A veterinarian should not be assumed to be board-certified in an AVMA-recognized veterinary specialty unless he/she identifies that distinction.

WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A VETERINARY LICENSE AND BOARD-CERTIFIED?

A veterinary license is a legal requirement for the practice of veterinary medicine in any of the United States and is issued to graduates of veterinary schools who have passed a licensing examination. Board-certification is not a requirement to practice veterinary medicine but is the culmination of additional, intensive training in a specific field of veterinary medicine for several years after veterinary school and is awarded to those individuals who have successfully demonstrated the acquisition of advanced knowledge and skills by passing a certification examination developed by one of the AVMA-Recognized Veterinary Specialty Organizations.

IS A VETERINARIAN A SPECIALIST IF HE/SHE ADVERTISES AS ‘BOARD-ELIGIBLE’ OR ‘BOARD-QUALIFIED’?

No, a veterinarian may have fulfilled some of the training requirements leading to specialization but is not a specialist until he/she has successfully demonstrated the acquisition of advanced knowledge and skills by successfully completing a certification examination. The AVMA dissuades veterinarians from using these phrases in advertising or identification.