

**Report of the ADA Council On Ethics, Bylaws And Judicial Affairs on  
Advisory Opinion 5.F.3. UNEARNED, NONHEALTH DEGREES**

Advertising by dentists can provide information that helps dental patients make informed choices between practitioners and services. However, advertising that is false or misleading in a material respect does not serve this purpose. It can make the job of selecting a dentist or dental services more difficult and involves risk that the patient will be harmed by an inappropriate choice. The ADA *Principles of Ethics and Code of Professional Conduct* (ADA Code) states:

**5.F. ADVERTISING.**

Although any dentist may advertise, no dentist shall advertise or solicit patients in any form of communication in a manner that is false or misleading in any material respect.

The Council adopted Advisory Opinion 5.F.3. UNEARNED, NONHEALTH DEGREES in 1984 to address the question of when announcement of a degree by a dentist is false or misleading in a material respect. In the Council's view, the use of degrees in advertising for dental services can be misleading if it implies that the dentist has educational qualifications which the dentist, in fact, does not possess.

Patients are likely to believe that the degrees listed in an advertisement for dental services have some bearing on the dentist's qualifications to render oral health care. This is true if the degree is in a health service area such as prosthodontics or periodontics. This would not be true if the degree is in an area like world history or English literature.

Further, patients are likely to believe that a degree represents a minimum level of academic achievement, i.e., that the degree is "earned." This would not be the case if the degree was awarded for services or activities in an unrelated area, i.e., an honorary degree, or if it was awarded by an institution that did not meet recognized, academic standards, e.g., a so-called "diploma mill."

The Advisory Opinion states:

A dentist may use the title Doctor or Dentist, DDS, DMD or any additional earned, advanced academic degrees in health service areas in an announcement to the public. The announcement of an unearned academic degree may be misleading because of the likelihood that it will indicate to the public the attainment of specialty or diplomate status. For purposes of this advisory opinion, 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.

The use of a nonhealth degree in an announcement to the public may be a representation which is misleading because the public is likely to assume that any degree announced is related to the qualifications of the dentist as a practitioner.

Some organizations grant dentists fellowship status as a token of membership in the organization or some other form of voluntary association. The use of such fellowships in advertising to the public may be misleading because of the likelihood that it will indicate to the public attainment of education or skill in the field of dentistry.

Generally, unearned or nonhealth degrees and fellowships that designate association, rather than attainment, should be limited to scientific papers and curriculum vitae. In all instances, state law should be consulted. In any review by the council of the use of designations in advertising to the public, the council will apply the standard of whether the use of such is false or misleading in a material respect.

Since Advisory Opinion 5.F.3 was adopted, a number of questions have arisen concerning its interpretation. This report provides answers to those questions for the guidance of the members and the constituent and component dental societies.

***What credentials are covered by the Advisory Opinion?*** The Advisory Opinion applies to academic degrees such as a “doctorate,” “master” or “bachelor.” It also addresses the use of nonhealth degrees, honorary degrees and fellowships that designate association rather than attainment of education or skill in the field of dentistry.

***What is an “unearned” degree?*** An “unearned” degree is one that is awarded by an educational institution not accredited by a generally recognized accrediting body. It can also mean an “honorary” degree or title conferred by an educational institution in recognition of service or achievement, without the usual educational prerequisites or obligations or honorary fellowship.

***What are degrees in “health service areas”?*** Degrees in health service areas are degrees that relate to the clinical practice of dentistry or a health care area. An example is any degree in a recognized specialty area.

***How may unearned, nonhealth degrees and fellowships that designate membership association be ethically used?*** The use of such degrees and designations should generally be limited to activities that are not used for the direct solicitation of patients, including scientific papers and curriculum vitae. It may also include third party payment forms, letterhead and stationery or business cards, when they are not used for the direct solicitation of patients. In all instances, state law should be consulted.

***May the initials “DDS” be used by any dentist so long as he or she has earned an equivalent dental degree?*** The American Dental Association supports the principle that degree determination is the prerogative of the individual educational institution. It would

be consistent with this policy to use the designation of the degree that has been awarded. Dentists who have earned a doctor of dental surgery degree should use of the initials “DDS.” Dentists who have earned a doctor of dental medicine degree should use the initials “DMD.” In all instances, state law should be consulted.

***How is the Advisory Opinion be enforced?*** It is enforced like any other part of the *Code* through the tripartite system’s disciplinary process, which is spelled out in Chapter XII of the *ADA Bylaws*. The constituents and components are reminded that before a member can be disciplined, he or she is entitled to notice and a hearing conducted in accordance with Chapter XII, Section 20 of the *ADA Bylaws*.

*Advisory opinion adopted in 1984; amended 1999*  
*Report adopted in 1999*