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Board-certified? But in what, exactly?

It has become almost as cliché as the "take two aspirin" refrain: Make sure your doctor is board-certified.

Problem: That tells a plastic surgery patient very little if he or she doesn't also ask, "In what?"

■ **Is the doctor board-certified in plastic surgery? Or one of the other 23 specialties under the umbrella of the American Board of Medical Specialties?**

Many doctors who carry ABMS board-certification in, say, ophthalmology or dermatology expertly perform certain plastic surgery procedures, even if they don't have the plastic surgery board certification. But ask them to explain the relationship of their certification to your procedure.

■ **What if the doctor says he's certified in "cosmetic surgery"?**

The ABMS, based in Evanston, offers certification in plastic surgery, which encompasses an area of practice called "cosmetic surgery." But it has no board of cosmetic surgery, and offers no certification in it.

That isn't a blanket indictment of a doctor with other kinds of credentials. "It just means it's not the routine way [to establish them]," said Dr. Stephen H. Miller, executive vice president of the ABMS. So seek more information—at what university did the doctor train? What sort of residency program? Etc.

■ **Should you seek patient**

references?

Yes, but beware of a doctor who produces three people who "call you right back bragging about a doctor," Dr. Michael Byun, who is board-certified in plastic surgery, said. Maybe they are operating under an incentive besides goodwill.

■ **How about before/after photos of former patients?**

Useful. But remember computer images can be chosen (and even manipulated) to reflect stellar work. Ask whether the photos are an average result and out of how many, suggests Dr. Loren Schechter, board-certified in plastic surgery.

■ **Should you heed "top doctors" rankings in magazines?**

Note that magazines sometimes sell related advertising when they focus on a topic, and it can be hard to tell which is which. Read the fine print.

■ **Finally, is this any of your family doctor's business?**

Definitely. A primary-care doctor may be able to refer you to plastic surgeons and prescreen you—particularly if you have a condition that could cause complications.

Other questions? The American Society of Plastic Surgeons Web site is www.plasticsurgery.org. Its sister society, The American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery, is www.surgery.org. The American Board of Medical Specialties is www.abms.org.

—W.N.