

Mentoring, teaching responsibilities spur Dr. Richard Williams to become board certified

If you are going to talk the talk, you need to walk the walk, as the saying goes. And, it is a saying to which Dr. Richard Williams can relate.

As a part-time faculty member and mentor to orthodontic residents at the University of Tennessee Health Science Center (UTHSC) College of Dentistry in Memphis, Dr. Richard Williams, along with the other UTHSC faculty members, highly encourages the residents to take The American Board of Orthodontics (ABO) Initial Certification Examination (ICE) upon graduation. Dr. Williams, who graduated from the University of Tennessee in 1985 and has taught at UTHSC for almost 31 years, accepted the role as clinic director of the Department of Orthodontics in July 2015. This new role was his tipping point to accomplish a longtime goal — board certification.

Dr. Williams always planned to become board certified, but, as he says, “life got in the way.” By the early 1990s, when he was treating and finishing board-quality cases from his private practice, other big life events intervened — he built his office and then his house. Shortly thereafter, in 1993 and 1995, his two daughters were born. Life became even busier.

Fast forward to 2015. Due to his new commitment to the Department of Orthodontics, Dr. Williams realized the time had come to present for the examination. “Opportunities presented for me to advance from a 20-percent appointment at the University of Tennessee Orthodontic Department to a 40-percent appointment by assuming the duties of clinic director,” he said. “While highly encouraged to get my board certification (by other UTHSC faculty members), I also felt it best to pursue certification if I were to serve in the capacity of clinic director. ... I felt like it was inappropriate for me, as a mentor and teacher of residents, to ask residents to do something I had not done.”

Dr. Williams, who practices in Southaven, Mississippi, had taken and passed the ABO’s Written Examination in the fall of 1985. With that part of the board-certification process accomplished, he only needed to pass the ICE. He registered for the examination in February 2015 and would join four UTHSC graduates (the class of 2015) at the board examination in September 2015.

Last summer, Dr. Williams, who is the immediate past president of the Southern Association of Orthodontists (SAO), devoted numerous evening hours and weekends to preparing his cases. But, the entire preparation process was not without its challenges. “A lot of emotion went into it,” he said. “I had a lot of frustration with the records. Some little piece seemed to be missing from each case.”

As a result of his records review, Dr. Williams has since tightened office procedures. “I consistently provide quality treatment, but we’ve taken a closer look at how we are taking records,” he said. For example, he now verifies the photos right after his

staff members take them. “We are making sure we have the information on the front end now.”

Then, going into the examination, he had thoughts of “what if, as a 58-year-old doctor ... what if my students pass and I don’t? I had some apprehension, but I enjoyed the process once I was ready. I felt much better once I sent in the six cases,” he said.

In the end, and to their great relief, Dr. Williams and his former students passed the examination. “I have a unique sense of camaraderie with the four graduates,” Dr. Williams said. “One almost backed out (due to other commitments), but I have a strong relationship with him and mentored him through it. ... It was a nice sense of accomplishment when we finished, and it was an even greater sense of accomplishment once we passed. We gave each other high-fives from a distance. We communicated by text.”

Dr. Eladio DeLeon Jr., the immediate past president of the ABO, appreciates the tenacity and resolve of orthodontists who take the board examination after they have been in practice for many years. Dr. DeLeon had been encouraging Dr. Williams to take the examination for some time, but was unaware that Dr. Williams would be at the September 2015 examination. When Dr. DeLeon greeted the orthodontists in attendance for that examination, he immediately noticed a tall distinguished gentleman at the back of the room. “I was pleasantly overwhelmed and momentarily dazed when I realized it was a respected friend and leader of our profession,” he said. “I immediately admired his resolve in stepping up to take this challenge. He had so much more on the line as he was president-elect of the SAO and the new clinic director at the University of Tennessee.

“With this in mind, I was thrilled to see Dr. Williams in attendance and anxious for him to do well, but, in fairness to all the other candidates, I had to control my emotions. I knew that I could not reach out or acknowledge his presence. I, as well as the Board, had to treat him just like the other candidates. Fortunately, he had an outstanding outcome, and he is now board certified and president of the SAO. Dr. Williams leads by example, and, in my opinion, for him to achieve this goal of board certification is a wonderful example for his colleagues, alumni and residents. His residents, the University of Tennessee, the SAO and our profession are fortunate to have him join the academic ranks as a board-certified orthodontist.”

Back at UTHSC, Dr. Williams is applying his exam experience when he mentors the residents. “Just having gone through it (board certification) has given me a unique insight to mentor them,” he said.

The residents are required to start and finish a minimum of 48 cases in order to graduate from the three-year program, and all the cases must be prepared to board standards. The residents also present 20 of the cases as if they were submitting them for the Initial Clinical Examination.

After his firsthand experience, Dr. Williams now knows how much time goes into case preparation. To ensure residents get the most out of the case reviews, the UTHSC faculty members are conducting the reviews with increased scrutiny. Earlier this year, Dr. Williams and Dr. Terry Trojan, chair and program director of the Department of Orthodontics, also reviewed three cases from each of the graduating residents, including their strongest and weakest cases. During these two-on-one reviews, the residents had to defend their treatment plans and evaluate the outcomes.

“I continually tell my residents that the best thing they can take from their education is the ability to think critically and to continue to learn over an entire career,” Dr. Williams said. “The ABO provides a process for us to measure a completed case against a standard and to continue to learn from the treatment administered. The board provides a benchmark we should strive to attain for our patients.”

His mentoring also extends to his colleagues. Nine UTHSC faculty members are currently board certified, but the number continues to grow. Dr. Williams is currently coaching another fellow faculty member who is preparing for the Initial Certification Examination.

In his practice, Dr. Williams is taking advantage of the [ABO's new resources](#) to educate patients about board certification. He practices with Dr. Nathan Hamman, who is also a board-certified UTHSC graduate and faculty member. In addition to their Southaven office, they also have offices in Hernando and Olive Branch, Mississippi. The two are currently rebranding their practice and plan to incorporate the ABO logo into their printed materials and signage.

Dr. Williams intends to recertify in 10 years. At that point, he could be retired from full-time practice, but he may still be teaching. Potentially, he could use the cases he oversees as a faculty member.

In the meantime, he encourages all orthodontists to pursue board certification. “The personal satisfaction would make it worthwhile for any practitioner,” he said.