A Brief Historical Review of Certification within the Ophthalmic Photographers' Society

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Chapter One—The Early Years

Introduction: As memories dim with time and perspectives shift with current trends, perceptions of events long ago tend to acquire increasingly varied interpretation. It is with this thought in mind that the authors undertake to chronicle the key steps in our Society’s struggle with the formulation and implementation of a certification program, and to document and credit the efforts of the many who contributed to its ultimate success. It is to those contributors that we dedicate this brief retrospective.

The Beginning

In 1971, two years after the formation of the Ophthalmic Photographers' Society (OPS), Don Wong, hearing complaints from a number of members regarding the lack of appropriate job descriptions and classifications available to their employers, proposed the establishment of a certification committee. Wong, along with others, felt that the Society could serve its membership best by evolving into an organization which would come to represent the Profession of Ophthalmic Photography itself. As an initial step in that process, this proposed committee would develop job descriptions and a certifying program to establish a definition of the ophthalmic photographer. (At the time, photographers found themselves in classifications of convenience, from lab technician, photomicrographist to elevator operator.)

The Board of Directors approved, and Don Wong was appointed as Chairman of our first Education and Certification Committee. Initial committee members were; Dr. Louis Gerard of Houston, John Goeller of New York, and Johnny Justice, Jr., of Houston. Certification had become an official agenda item for the Society.

The First Effort

By the 1972 Annual Business Meeting, Don Wong presented a report of the Education and Certification Committee. This report (also published in the December, 1972 Newsletter) was amazingly complete and impressively detailed. Essential elements were identified and mechanisms proposed to carry out:

"... A well planned, well coordinated program of education, as well as a system of examinations, created and executed by the Ophthalmic Photographers' Society, [which] is essential to the future development and growth of Ophthalmic Photography as a profession...." 1

A "well coordinated program of education" was identified early as a key ingredient in a credentialing program. To that end, Terrance Tomer was appointed chairman/coordinator of the OPS Basic Instruction Course by president Ogden Frazier. The first such course, designed to provide the basic educational needs of a certification program, was presented at the Fourth Annual Meeting, September 1973, in Dallas.

At that same meeting, two methods of qualifying the ophthalmic photographer were proposed:

"1. Qualification only, no grading.

The simplest method of certifying the ophthalmic photographer would be to present the photographer with a certificate of competency, after he/she passed the certification exam.

2. Three grades: Apprentice, Junior and Senior levels. Because there already exist varying levels of expertise in the profession, it would be logical to use a multi-leveled method of certifying the ophthalmic photographer. This system would be the most difficult to plan, but would probably be the best to implement." 2

Figure 1: Don Wong, (seated far left) participating in discussions at the 1973 Annual Meeting in Dallas.
The committee recommended adoption of the multi-level system, and also suggested that examiners be chosen on the merits of their demonstrated knowledge and expertise in ophthalmic photography.

Footnote:  
1. From Don Wong’s unpublished archives of OPS History.  
2. From a report to the Board of Directors, by Don Wong, Chairman, Education and Certification Committees 1973 Annual Meeting.

Progress Slows

The Board of Directors chose not to act on the proposal. Some of the more established members may have felt that it was not essential to pursue a certification process since they were already well regarded as professionals by the ophthalmic community. The effort required for such a program may have been deemed out of proportion to the benefits foreseen at the time.

Others Take Notice

Shortly after the 1973 Annual Meeting, Don Wong, as President of the OPS, received an invitation from Dr. Hugh Monahan, President of the Joint Commission on Allied Health Personnel in Ophthalmology (JCAHPO), to send a representative to their next annual business meeting to describe the aims and objectives of the Society. On December 28 of that year, Dr. Bud Appleton, president-elect of JCAHPO, also wrote a letter to Wong with suggestions regarding areas to consider in structuring a certification program. The suggestions were found to be helpful and gave our program new direction.

On February 2, 1974, at the Royal Orleans Hotel in New Orleans, Don Wong made a fifteen minute presentation to JCAHPO and described in some detail the rationale for structuring formal education and certification programs for our profession.

No formal action was taken at the time, but the Society continued its informal relationship with JCAHPO and maintained contact with several individuals within that organization.

Work continued and by the 26th of August, 1975, Job Descriptions were completed. Following approval by the Education and Certification Committee, they were submitted to the Board of Directors.

Apparently, the Board was still not ready to act. In looking back it seems odd that a proposal that was essentially complete in every respect did not move forward. As early as July 1972, the combination of education and certification was a well recognized necessary element in the progress of the Society and its service to its members. In an article in the July, 1972, issue of Photographic Applications in Science and Medicine Don Wong presents those pursuits as unquestionably appropriate agenda items which would receive due attention, and progress to their logical conclusion. Unfortunately, it was already 1975 and still no concrete commitment was made. It is probable that the Board felt reluctant to act until the question of affiliation was settled. And, that question was to continue as the most hotly debated, principal issue for the next two years.

The Second Effort—A Change of Direction

Due to other societal commitments, Don Wong resigned as Chairman of the Education and Certification Committee and Terrance Tomer was appointed in April of 1976. His tenure, however, was to be a short one.

At the Annual Business Meeting, a group of members, led by Carl Kittelson, made a move to dictate the direction of the Certification Committee. Tomer challenged the action and indicated that if the motion carried, he would have no alternative but to resign. The motion carried and Tomer resigned.

Interestingly, at a meeting later that week, Tomer, as the newly elected President of the Society, appointed Carl Kittelson as the new Chair of the Certification Committee. Members were: Gary Barnes, Joseph Bishop, Peter Breit, Isaac Carbajal, Paul Castellon, Richard Castillo, Ruth Isen, Mary Federico, Marlene Fishman, Jay Fitzgerald, Doris Clark Gaston, Richard Irvin, Kenneth Kostuk, Csaba Martonyi, Cathy Melrose, James Metz, Bruce Morris, Jeremy Pantell, Anita Ruble, Terrance Tomer and Don Wong. Against outspoken opposition from within the ranks, the majority of this new and somewhat cumbersome committee chose not to continue with the work already done but began anew with the question of which organization to solicit as our official certifying body. It was also decided that new job descriptions would be created for three levels of certification and several subcommittees began exploring the same issues which had been previously addressed. Much discussion and argument followed and, in spite of considerable effort, little progress was made toward the committee’s initially stated goals. However, a ground swell was building.

In 1977, a wonderful phenomenon manifested itself: member involvement! An impressive number of individuals made proposals of varying complexity.

Figure 2: Terry Tomer, Dallas, 1977
Several strong opinions were tendered concerning affiliation; some strongly in favor of aligning with the Biological Photographers' Association (BPA) and others suggesting that JCAHPO was the only appropriate choice. Letters to the Editor appeared in large numbers in our Newsletter, to be championed or challenged by still more letters. Prominent members lent their weight to one cause or another. And, affiliation remained the pivotal issue on which The Question continued to teeter. It was not to teeter much longer.

The Third Effort—The Pendulum Swings

At the 1977 Annual Meeting the Board of Directors appointed Csaba L. Martonyi and Barrett P. Walker as Co-Chairs with Martonyi in charge of the certification effort and Walker responsible for education. Committee members included Gary Barnes, Doris Clark Gaston, Linda K. Hirte, Carl A. Kittelson, Richard A. Lewis, MD., Don Wong and Johnny Justice, Jr. (ex officio). This committee returned to the direction set by Don Wong, and proceeded to examine methods by which a certification mechanism could be implemented within the Society.

On December 1 and 2, Martonyi and Barnes attended the constitutional convention of the National Commission on Allied Health Certifying Agencies (today known as the National Commission for Certifying Agencies, or NCCA) in Miami. We were invited to send representation to determine if affiliation with that body would be of interest to us. Already having made the unequivocal decision that "self certification" was our only appropriate choice in terms of service to the Membership, this meeting further convinced us of the benefits of such affiliation. From a report to the Board of Directors, Martonyi stated, in part: "My contact with this group and its founders serves to reinforce my impression that voting membership in the NCAHCA, with our own certification program, would be pursuant to the best interests of the Society." Such membership would literally place us on par with other "national certifying agencies" (e.g. JCAHPO). It would essentially secure our autonomy and acceptance as the credentialing body for our profession.

Article Ten

A critical building block in the foundation of our proposed program was an addition to the Bylaws to legalize the creation of a Board of Certification. An amendment was drafted which contained the necessary elements to facilitate the transition, as well as provide for some future changes that would ultimately have to be made. This amendment was embodied in Article Ten.

Momentum Grows—Progress Accelerates

By June of 1978 a definitive Proposal for a Certification Program had been through four drafts with review and comments from all committee members. Dr. Richard A. Lewis gave the Proposal his famous "red pen" treatment which, while not necessarily the prescription of choice for the authors' egos, was a critically important contribution in respect to organizational, technical and editorial accuracy.

Looking back, it is interesting to note how much time and effort was expended on what today seems quite straightforward. But, of course, in those days everything was new and everything we did we were doing for the first time. Each point, at least to the individual proposing it, was of the greatest importance. One debate comes to mind regarding external photography. Barrett Walker was adamant about including it as a requirement for CRA, and Don Wong was even more insistent that it be left out. Wong's reason was that fluorescein angiography was the single, most identifiable task that clearly differed from the traditional duties of the biomedical photographer. In emphasizing this extraordinary function of the CRA, we would have the greatest immunity from the efforts of others who might wish to legitimate their claim of responsibility for our credentialing based on similarity of function. Considering the pressure that Wong was placed under by the BPA to bring the OPS membership into its fold, it is small wonder that he wished us to be unquestionably unique. Ultimately, external photography was placed in the second level, but not without several heated discussions.

Another item of controversy within the certification committee was film processing and printing. Some felt that it should not be included in the requirements for CRA since many already functioning as angiographers were not required to perform that task. This now seems an odd issue to disagree on since the CRA must clearly be able to facilitate processing and printing of the angiographic results in whatever fashion required by his or her employer. Ultimately, general agreement was established with the fourth, or "Blue Draft," version of the proposal and was unanimously approved for presentation to the Board of Directors.

Figure 3: Csaba Martonyi leads the discussion at the Annual meeting, Dallas, 1977
The Proposal described three levels of certification and provided comprehensive job descriptions for each. The Certified Retinal Angiographer, the most important level, would clearly define the unique role of the ophthalmic photographer. The Certified Ophthalmic Photographer, the second level, was designed to encompass the greatest number of our members based on level of function, knowledge and experience. This level was specifically intended to accommodate the individuals who had been active in ophthalmic photography for many years. The Certified Master Ophthalmic Photographer was the top level, to provide further opportunity for distinction for those in academic environments; individuals who were active in all phases of our profession, including research and teaching. The demonstrated ability to create effective audio-visual or textual teaching programs was among the requirements.

The Proposal also contained detailed "requirements for certification" for all levels, and an additional "explanation of requirements" to diminish the possibility of misinterpretation.

On June 24, 1978, the Board of Directors unanimously approved the Proposal of a Certification Program for the Ophthalmic Photographers’ Society, as well as Article Ten for placement on the upcoming ballot.

The Proposed "Board of Certification"

The next challenge for the Certification Committee was the formation of a "Board of Certification". Much discussion centered on the question of how to select the most qualified individuals. Ultimately, a point system, based on qualifications and accomplishments, as originally suggested by Marlene Fishman and elaborated by Don Wong, was agreed upon.

To initiate the process, three members, Martonyi, Walker and Wong, were selected in 1978 to act as core members of the proposed certifying body. A comprehensive and somewhat complicated point credit system was developed and the membership was solicited for applicants.

The OPS Formally Embraces Certification

Article Ten was overwhelmingly adopted by the membership and the Board of Certification was officially created. The three core members were automatically appointed to the Board, with Csaba L. Martonyi as its first Chair. (On that same ballot, Martonyi was elected the ninth president of the OPS, placing him in the Chair of the Board of Directors. This fortuitous arrangement, plus the fact that several others were members of both Boards, facilitated rapid action and, therefore, progress in putting into motion our certification program. However, this arrangement was to exist for this two year term only. Martonyi himself included the stricture in Article Ten of the Bylaws that, after this term, the Chairman of the Board of Certification could not hold simultaneously another executive position in the Society. This was a first and necessary step in creating the autonomy of the Board of Certification required for ultimate accreditation by NCAHCA.)

On December 14, 1978, after lengthy screening and review, the following nominees to the Board of Certification were selected: Bruce Busse, Earl Choromokos, Ogden Frazier, Terry George, Gerald Hoover, John Johnson, Ken Julian, Carl Kittelson, William Ludwick, Terry Tomer, Marshall Tyler and Thomas Van Cader. Upon notification of their candidacy, eleven of the twelve accepted and were placed into consideration by the Board of Directors at their next meeting.

On February 3, 1979, the Board of Directors met in Houston at the home of Carol and Johnny Justice. At this meeting, the seven remaining positions on the Board of Certification were filled, as follows: Bruce J. Busse, Earl A. Choromokos, John L. Johnson, Carl A. Kittelson, Richard A. Lewis, MD. (as our physician member), William A. Ludwick, Terrance L. Tomer and Thomas C. Van Cader. Upon notification of their candidacy, eleven of the twelve accepted and were placed into consideration by the Board of Directors at their next meeting.

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The Program is Put Into Motion

Work began immediately on the curriculum for the CRA educational program, a study guide, and the examination itself. On May 15, 1979, a mailing from the Board of Certification was sent to the membership containing a Job Description and Requirements for Certification, a preliminary Study Guide, and an announcement of the Erie, Penn. Course and First Examination for Certified Retinal Angiographer.

Figure 4: (left to right) Don Wong, Tom Van Cader, William Ludwick, Dallas, 1977
The Erie Course

The Erie Course, predominantly the product of Barrett Walker's tireless efforts, consisted of several elements: an introductory session for those with limited experience; a comprehensive course in retinal angiography; and an OPS Regional IV meeting overlapping part of the proceedings. The Course Faculty consisted of Bruce Busse, Earl Choromokos, John Johnson, Johnny Justice, Carl Kittelson, Richard Lewis, MD., William Ludwick, Csaba Martonyi, Barry Stamm, MD., Terry Tomer, Tom Van Cader, Barrett Walker, and Don Wong. Chief Coordinator was Barrett Walker assisted by Christopher Moore and Barry Stamm, MD., of the Hamot Medical Center.

The First Examination

June 17, 1979: A test of the Program—
as well as the applicants for certification.

A moment of great joy, and anxiety! We were about to find out if our efforts would measure up to the task. Unquestionably, the program would require continued effort, and much refining was yet to come. Nevertheless, it was a success. The Society had a Certification Program. It was functional. A ten year goal realized. (Of interest to those who see "significance" in numbers; it was almost exactly ten years from the time Johnny Justice proposed the formation of a society to the time that we conducted our first examination; the close of our first decade. It was Article Ten that created the first Board of Certification, consistent of ten members...hmm.)

The Society had matured: Its members far more aware of the potential benefits of credentialing, and the possible negative implications of leaving that process to others. So, this "Third Effort," well timed, and headed by a confluence of very motivated individuals, was destined to succeed; in a period of only twenty months. From the last appointment of a Chair of the Certification Committee to our first Certified Retinal Angiographers less than two years elapsed. All that had been required was a manic, single mindedness that excluded most everything else. And spouses who were extremely tolerant and supportive.

The First Certified Retinal Angiographers

Fifty seven individuals were examined. Forty eight, or 84%, passed the written examination. All but three passed the practical. Many who passed had not as yet completed all the requirements (portfolio and CPR certification) and were certified at a later date. Thirty three individuals completed all segments by the required date and became the first CRA's in history. Their names are listed in alphabetic order.

THOMAS AGER
RAYMOND BLOCH
BONNIE CARLSTROM
PHILLIP CHIN
MICHAEL CLARK
RICHARD DEAN CLARK
MARTIN CHROBAK
MARGARET CROSSGROVE
CHARLES DOUGLAS
THOMAS EGNATZ
NANCY EPSTEIN
CHARLES E. ETIENNE
JANET M. FAEHNLE
FERD B. FRENCH
RON HARPER
PETER B. HAY
KENNETH G. JULIAN

JOHNNY JUSTICE, JR.
HARRY KACHADOORIAN
CHUNG-KOO KIM
KENNETH P. KOSTUK
JOHN E. KRETZER
CAROL KROHN
TED MAISER
SARAH G. MANLY
CHRISTOPHER MOORE
JAMIE NICHOLL
BERNARD ROBIN
DEBORAH ROSS
AGNES SANDOR
SHEILA SMITH
RANDY SPENCER
DOROTHY TAFT

(It is interesting to note that, 15 years later, 15 of that original group are still certified and active in the profession.)

A special plaque commemorates the occasion of our first Examination for Certification and recognizes the Hamot Medical Center as the Hosting Site. It remains conspicuously displayed to this day.