As my work with Health Education England continues, the issue of aesthetic registers frequently comes up and the mixed feelings about them surface just as often. Almost every aesthetic nurse I have met has an opinion on them, as do I, which, in an attempt to avoid conflict, I have often reserved for only trusted friends and colleagues. However, perhaps it is time to address the practicalities, benefits and pitfalls of such registers, while avoiding leaning too heavily on my own sentiments.

To set the scene of the medical aesthetic register, it is by no means a new concept and there is without doubt a slight void where an official register should be for non-surgical practitioners, which, for the likes of surgeons, has already been filled by the ‘specialist register’, even if it is exceptionally difficult to navigate.

The most basic reason I believe we don’t have one official register is the timeless one—that our industry grew bigger and quicker than was expected and combined with a proverbial blind eye from the government and medical councils no-one wished to claim responsibility of what truly and officially defines an aesthetic clinician, whether it’s nurse, doctor or dentist. The hesitance to release a register of aestheticians is clear with the fear of liability casting a shadow over it.

It is for this reason that third-party registers have emerged in their own various forms. First came Treatments You Can Trust from the Independent Healthcare Advisory Services (IHAS), which wasn’t really the success they had hoped for. Then others followed with simple clinic listings or more known membership-based directories, such as WhatClinic, The Consulting Room, and more recently Save Face, all of which slightly differ in format, but do they differ in intentions? While the idea of a comprehensive listing of medically qualified aestheticians is great in principle, we have to ask ourselves what they offer to the practitioner and if they justify the considerable price tag that comes with them.

To qualify for some registers, there are some reasonable vetting steps required. These steps include providing insurance documents, training certificates and respective medical council registration, to name a few. There are added extra benefits too, which are definitely useful for clinicians including product guides, protocol documents, advice forums and networking with other aesthetic professionals.

These steps and benefits are on the surface valuable, but when broken down the third-party ‘accreditation’ may be unnecessary, as it is indeed the insurers, the respective medical council and the training programmes that truly accredit an aesthetic practitioner, not a branded package with added extras that are already available through several membership groups such as (but not limited to) the Private Independent Aesthetic Practices Association.

With this in mind, one has to carefully consider what benefits you seek from a voluntary register and if they can truly be reaped. For example, it could be explored as an additional flow of business and some may also look for a visible and positive affirmation of their skills in the small emblem they are given when signing up to add to their website and premises. It is important to note, however, that a little bit of self-check and reflection could be worth just as much. If you can feel confident presenting your medical and training certificates to a patient on request and talking them through the experience and the treatment itself, why pay someone else a sizeable sum to tell them exactly the same if in fact the customer actually refers to the register in the first place? Many registers charge a fee of £500 upwards, which when looked at from another angle could be used to actually enhance an existing skill or fund training in a new one.

There is ultimately no liability taken by corporate-run registers and the physical checks some offer usually last no more than an hour by another registered medical professional who isn’t necessarily qualified in the field of aesthetics. Even if they are, who’s to say they are more qualified than the registrant themselves?

It is important to emphasise that the intentions behind these registers really do appear to come from a good place and one of care and passion; however, the delivery from a company rather than a medical council has to be put into question, as almost all those who have willingly shared their thoughts with me have agreed that this information should be delivered simply and without the danger of reviews and fluffy descriptions turning an important reference list into a TripAdvisor-like quandary of clinics.

It would be so reassuring if the public did seek medical qualifications as the primary quality in an aesthetic practitioner, but the cynic in me says those days are sadly dwindling as the general public is increasingly desensitised to medical cosmetics. 

What can voluntary registers truly offer aesthetic practitioners and the public?

Becoming a member of a voluntary medical aesthetic register can carry both benefits and pitfalls. Although there are several added advantages, it could be argued that the sizeable fee charged to each registrant is not justified. In this month’s column, Yvonne Senior reflects on the controversial topic of voluntary registers and ‘accreditation’ in the aesthetics industry