

Now on the Web: Which Professionals Are in Bad Standing, and Why

By DAN BARRY

In the belief that knowledge is power, the New York State Board of Regents has placed licensing information for 610,000 professionals, including any disciplinary action, on the Internet. Now, with the click of a computer mouse, a consumer can learn who is in good standing — from the psychologist recommending more sessions to the interior decorator insisting on a Viking theme for every room in the house.

"It's been a deep secret for too long as to who is licensed, who is not licensed, and which professionals have been disciplined," J. Edward Meyer, chairman of the Regents

committee on professions, said yesterday. "We have a huge number of people holding themselves out as health professionals and design professionals who frankly aren't licensed. We get hundreds of complaints a year."

Using the World Wide Web site of the state Education Department, the board began "on-line verification" on Friday for professionals who are licensed in 38 categories, including engineers, architects, nurses and nutritionists. The brief summaries include educational backgrounds and dates of license expiration.

In addition, synopses of more than 1,000

disciplinary actions from the last year are also provided. For example, the curious can learn the name and address of the nurse from Rochester whose license was revoked after being convicted of grand larceny, or of the Upper West Side masseuse who did not contest charges that he had kissed the breasts and feet of a female patient. Mr. Meyer said that by late March the list would be expanded to include cases from the last three years.

The Education Department's Web site also began to provide a link on Friday to the Web site of the state Health Department's Office of Professional Medical Conduct,

which allows consumers to learn about disciplinary actions taken against physicians. The Regents used to be responsible for disciplining doctors, but that duty was shifted to the Health Department by Gov. Mario M. Cuomo in 1991.

Other states, including Massachusetts and Texas, provide some information about licensed professions. But Mr. Meyer said the New York site was the largest in the country, and the only one to include specific details about disciplinary actions.

Previously, the only ways to find out about the licensing of an optometrist or a

midwife was to leave a message on the answering machine for the department's Office of Professions, or to send a letter. "The political and financial reality is we've taken a 30 percent cut in staff in the last two years," Mr. Meyer said. "So you could easily wait for a month or two to get the answer to your question."

So far, the reaction from professional groups has been positive. For example, Robert Gray, a representative of the New York State Society of Certified Public Accountants, told The Associated Press: "A well-informed client is a client we can better serve."

"We did anticipate that some of the licensed professional organizations might be concerned about this," Mr. Meyer said. "But the representatives of 21 of the licensed professions met to support the public disclosure. The different professional societies would like to weed out the bad apples."

Meanwhile, Zenia Mucha, the communications director for Gov. George E. Pataki, brought up a familiar question: Why does the Board of Regents hold such power? The answer lies as much in political reality as it does in the educational component of professional licensing.

The Governor has no control over the 16 Regents. They are elected in a

joint session of the State Senate and Assembly. The board, an independent body that governs the Department of Education, also sets the educational standards for many licensed professions, and is empowered to suspend and revoke licenses in cases of professional misconduct.

It does not prosecute people who practice without a license; that is the responsibility of the State Attorney General. Nor does it license non-professionals, like barbers and real-estate agents; that is the duty of the Department of State.

The conduct of lawyers is monitored by the appellate division of the

Ms. Mucha said the arrangement did not make sense. "It's absolutely absurd to have the Board of Regents, which should be concentrating on education, engaged in licensing when the Department of State specifically deals with licensing," she said.

To eliminate what she called a duplication of service, Ms. Mucha said, the Governor proposed last month to have the board's licensing responsibilities shifted to the Department of State. The governor's previous attempts to curtail the board, or to eliminate it entirely, have failed.

Still, Ms. Mucha praised the board's efforts to make public information more accessible. "We would applaud that," she said. "It certainly helps the consumer."