A row has broken out between the British Medical Association (BMA) and the British Dental Association after the BMA called for dentists to be banned from calling themselves ‘Dr’.

It follows a ruling by the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) that ordered a dentist to stop calling himself ‘Dr’ in his advertisements, unless he had a medical qualification or a PhD.

Dr Jonathan Fielden, chairman of the British Medical Association’s consultants committee, believes dentists should be banned from using the term to protect patient safety.

He said that patients ‘have a right to clarity and to be secure in the knowledge that the person treating them is competent and qualified to do so’.

He added that it could mislead patients into thinking they are medically qualified when they are not.

Dentists are not banned from calling themselves doctor but they can face penalties if it is judged that they are not being clear enough about their qualifications. The ASA says that if a dentist refers to himself or herself as a ‘Dr’ without making it obvious that they are not doctors, it is a clear breach of advertising laws.

However the British Dental Association claims using the term does not confuse patients and just brings Britain into line with the rest of Europe, where the term is commonly used. ‘We believe that dentists should be permitted to use the courtesy title ‘Dr’ should they wish to’ said Peter Ward, the chief executive of the British Dental Association (BDA).

He added: ‘The General Dental Council has no objection to the title and its use is becoming widespread.’

In virtually all other European states and other English speaking countries throughout the world dentists are given the title and we support harmonisation with professional colleagues from overseas.’

He claimed that calling dentists in the UK ‘Dr’ could remove confusion for patients and dentists from abroad. ‘Many patients in this country, both UK nationals and those from abroad, address their dentist as ‘Dr’ and many dentists and patients from abroad are confused by the fact that dentists in Britain are not referred to by the title,’ he said.

The Department of Health (DH) claims that the title of ‘Doctor’ is not a protected title, so dentists don’t have to be a medical practitioner to use it.

A DH spokesman added, however, that there was a provision in the Dentists Act 1984 which stops dentists from using any title or description to suggest a qualification that they do not possess. However it is up to the General Dental Council to enforce that rule.