



YOU & YOUR DOCTOR

A guide to your relationship with your doctor

Medical Council of New Zealand

Protecting the public, promoting good medical practice

Te tiaki te iwi whānau me te whakatairanga pai i te mahi e pā ana ki te taha rongoā

The primary purpose of the Medical Council of New Zealand is to promote and protect public health and safety.

The Council has the following key functions:

- registering doctors
- setting standards and guidelines
- recertifying and promoting lifelong learning for doctors
- reviewing practising doctors if there is a concern about performance, professional conduct or health.

Registered doctors

To practise, doctors must be registered. Registration means the doctor is trained to standards set and monitored by the Medical Council of New Zealand.

The medical register is available from the Medical Council. The Council's website lists doctors actively practising in New Zealand. It includes doctors' names, qualifications, details of when they were registered, and any vocational branch (eg, paediatrics). The register also lists any restrictions on the doctor to practise.

The website address is **www.mcnz.org.nz**

Doctors update their education regularly, with annual checks by the Medical Council.

You and your doctor

A guide for patients and their families

For you to get the best possible health care, you and your doctor need to work together.

The relationship you develop with your doctor is very important. It should be based on mutual trust, clear communication, honesty and respect.

Seeing one doctor over time helps your doctor to know about you and your health and provide the best possible care. In turn, you get to know your doctor better and that makes each visit easier.

Choosing a doctor

You can choose your own doctor. The Medical Council of New Zealand (the Council) recommends that you choose a general practitioner (GP).

What is a GP?

A GP is also known as a family doctor. GPs are doctors who look after your general health and provide a wide range of family health services. If you have a specific concern you can sometimes go directly to a specialist in private practice, eg, a paediatrician, dermatologist or ophthalmologist. You do not have to see your GP first, but we recommend you do because they are trained to assess and treat any problems you have, and will refer on when necessary.

How do I find a GP?

- Ask your family/whānau or friends/neighbours about their GP.
- Look in the front of your telephone book, under Registered Medical Practitioners.
- Ask a community health group or Citizens Advice Bureau.

Things to think about when choosing a GP

- **Location** – Is the GP's practice near your work or home?
- **Opening hours** – Is there an after-hours service? Does the GP make home visits?
- **Cost** – Are children's visits free or subsidised? Are low income workers/ community card users catered for?

- **Your personal preferences** – Do you want a female or male GP? Do you want a GP from your own culture?
- **Your special needs** – Do you need interpreter services? Do you need disability access? Deaf translation?
- **The type of practice** – Does the practice have one GP or many? Is it a union health clinic? Is it marae-based? Is it a community practice? Is it a medical centre with other services?
- **The GP's area of practice** – Does the GP also specialise in a particular type of medicine, for example sports medicine?
- Look on the online register at www.mcnz.org.nz to check if your doctor is registered.

You might also want to know the GP's beliefs. For example, some GPs do not advise on contraception or abortion for cultural or religious reasons. They must refer patients who want these services to a family planning clinic or another GP.

What do I do if a GP is not accepting new patients?

In some areas, GPs' practices are so overloaded they cannot accept new patients. If you are really sick, a GP may agree to see you even though you are not registered with the practice. But you may need to find another practice if you want to be seen for non-urgent problems. Talk to the local Primary Health Organisation (PHO) for advice. The Ministry of Health (phone 04 496 2000) will be able to tell you how to contact them.

After-hours care

Your GP will have made sure that 24 hour care is available, but this may include the use of other GPs, especially on weekends.

If you live in a rural area, your GP might share duties with another GP in a nearby town. Find out in advance who to contact after hours.

Fees and length of appointments

You usually need to make an appointment to see a doctor. Make sure you know how much the appointment will cost before you agree to it.

When you make an appointment, ask how much time your doctor allows for seeing each patient. If you think you will need more time, ask how much more that will cost. You can ask if your doctor will see you and your family together, and what that will cost.

The fee for an appointment often includes ordering tests, filling in forms, and referrals. Your doctor should tell you if these things will cost extra. Information about fees and the length of appointments may be displayed on the waiting room wall. If you have any questions, ask at reception.

If patients before you take a long time or need urgent attention, your doctor may run late. Ask the nurse or receptionist what's happening if you think you have been waiting too long.

What to expect from your doctor

1 Good medical care

Your doctor is committed to helping you. Your health and safety are your doctor's first concern.

- Your doctor must listen to you and ask about your medical history.
- He or she may need to physically examine you.
- If needed (and if available), special treatment or tests must be arranged for you.
- Your doctor may refer you to another health practitioner or specialist if you need or want their expertise.

2 Respect for your privacy

- Your personal dealings with your doctor are totally private. However, some statistical information from doctors' practices goes to organisations like the Ministry of Health for planning and funding purposes.
- You can choose to either see your doctor in private or to have one or more support people present (unless it is unsafe or infringes on another patient's right to privacy).
- If your doctor wants to share information about you with other people, he or she must explain why this is important.

3 Services

Your doctor can provide:

- screening for diseases without obvious symptoms
- care during acute illness
- ongoing advice and management of chronic illness
- mental health care
- lifestyle advice, eg, advice on food, exercise, quitting smoking
- assessments for Work and Income benefits such as the disability allowance
- medical checks for work
- vaccinations for overseas travel
- vaccinations to prevent illness
- diagnosis—assessment to see if you have certain diseases
- medical certificates to cover you for time off work.

If doctors are going to be away or unavailable for a time, they must arrange for their patients' care. This means you will see a 'locum', or relief doctor, until your doctor is available again.

4 Test results

- If you need to have a blood or other medical test, first check your doctor's policy on advising test results, and how long it should take.
- Some doctors will contact you if the results are normal, but most will not contact you unless the results are not normal.
- If you think test results are taking a long time, phone the nurse or receptionist to find out what has happened.

5 Clear communication

You must be told everything you need and want to know about your treatment and personal care.

- Your doctor must explain your condition, and tell you about any tests, procedures and treatments.

- Your doctor should explain all the options, including an assessment of the benefits, expected risks, side effects and costs of each option.
- You need to be fully informed before you agree to a service or treatment. If you do not understand something your doctor has told you, ask him or her to explain it again.
- Your doctor should answer all your questions and check to make sure you understand the answers.

What your doctor expects from you

1 Your medical history

Because it might affect your condition or treatment, you need to tell your doctor about:

- any health problems you have had in the past
- your family's medical history
- any operations, major illnesses, allergies, food restrictions and preferences, immunisations, whether you smoke, use drugs or drink alcohol.

You might feel embarrassed about giving some of this information but it is important. Remember, anything you tell your doctor is confidential.

2 Your symptoms and medication

Before you go to your doctor, you may want to write down a list of your symptoms and important questions you want to ask, so you don't forget anything.

- Tell your doctor about any pills, medicines or remedies, including natural remedies, you already take, or have taken. Taking the containers with you makes this easier.
- Tell your doctor about any other health treatment you are having, or thinking about having.

3 Clear communication

Tell your doctor everything about the reason for your visit—he or she expects accurate information from you.

- Tell your doctor about any cultural or religious beliefs that may affect your treatment, so your wishes can be respected.

- If you think your doctor hasn't understood something you have said, or what you meant, say it again (and repeat it if necessary).
- If you accept your doctor's advice on treatment, but change your mind later or are unable to follow the treatment, you must tell them.
- Tell the doctor if you are unhappy about anything—the consultation, the suggested treatment, the examination.

Visiting the doctor is sometimes quite stressful and you may feel tense or upset. You might like to take a family member or friend with you for support.

If there is a problem, talk to your doctor directly or write him or her a letter. Or, contact the Health and Disability Commissioner's office, freephone 0800 11 22 33.

Ending a doctor-patient relationship

You may decide to change doctors. If you do, ask your current doctor to transfer your records to your new doctor.

Very rarely, a doctor might decide to stop seeing a patient; if, for example, a patient builds up medical debts or threatens the doctor. In such a case, the doctor must pass the patient's records to a new doctor as soon as possible.

Informed consent

Informed consent is very important. You need to be given full information and time to think before you decide on a service or treatment.

In emergency situations, immediate essential treatment can be given without your consent, but further treatment will be given only with your approval.

When a patient loses the competence to make a decision—for example if they are unconscious, affected by medication, or suffering from dementia—another person named as having enduring power of attorney can give consent for them. A lawyer can arrange enduring power of attorney and supply a form to give to your doctor. You can also declare your preferences for future treatment in case you are unable to make an informed decision in later life.

If you have children under the age of 16 you may be asked to give consent for them.

Patients' rights

Just as doctors have a code of ethics, patients have a code of rights—the Code of Health and Disability Services Consumers' Rights.

You have the right to:

- full information and explanations you can understand
- be told the expected costs of prescriptions and the expected costs of being referred to a specialist
- privacy—you should be able to speak to your doctor without anyone hearing and you should be able to undress in private if you need a physical examination
- seek a second opinion if you have questions about any aspect of your treatment. Tell your doctor you would like a second opinion, and ask for the name of another doctor. You don't have to argue or justify your decision
- complain if you have any concerns about your doctor. Contact the Health and Disability Commissioner's office, freephone 0800 11 22 33.

Boundaries between patients and doctors

Sometimes you and your doctor will need to talk about very personal information. Your doctor must keep to proper boundaries.

Your doctor may need to examine parts of your body you might be embarrassed or uncomfortable about, for example, breast, vaginal or anal examinations.

The doctor should first tell you why the examination is needed and how it will be done. You must always be asked for your consent before an examination, and it should be clear that you have agreed before the doctor goes ahead.

When such personal examinations are needed, your doctor will:

- leave you to undress in private, unless you have asked for help
- keep you as covered as possible during the examination
- use gloves where appropriate
- explain what is being done and why.

If you don't like what the doctor is doing you can ask him or her to stop at any time. Tell your doctor if you feel uncomfortable or are not relaxed.

You may want to take a family member or friend for support.

You can ask for another health worker to be present, for example the doctor's nurse.

Your doctor should only talk about sexual problems and needs, sexual history, sexual activity or sexual preference when they relate to your health problem.

Sexual behaviour—including sexually suggestive comments or jokes, inappropriate comments about bodies, flirting or inappropriate touching—is never acceptable.

For more information, see the Council booklet *The importance of clear sexual boundaries in the patient-doctor relationship*. It is available online at www.mcnz.org.nz

Patient records

You can see your records or have copies of them made at any time. However, there are some reasons that a doctor may refuse you access to all your records. If access is refused, you must be told why.

Ask if you have to pay for copies of your records. As a general rule, a patient cannot be charged for copies of his or her records unless they have already asked for them within the past year. However, you can be charged for copies of video recordings, X-rays and CAT scans.

A doctor must keep your records for at least 10 years. If you change doctors, ask to have your records transferred to your new doctor.

The law protects your right to privacy. You must be told why information about you is recorded and who will see it. The Privacy Commissioner oversees how patient records are stored and handled. Contact freephone 0800 803 909 if you have a problem or want more information.

Research and medical education

If you are asked to take part in research or teaching, please take the request seriously because you may be helping the health of future generations.

- Before you decide, discuss the research project with your doctor and family. If you do take part, make sure you are kept fully informed about what the research is for and its results.
- Check that the research project is approved by an independent ethics committee.

- You must be asked for your written consent to take part.
- If you are asked to help train new doctors, for example by having students in the room during your appointment, it is your choice to say yes or no.
- Refusing to take part in research or teaching will not have any effect on your treatment.

Internet medicine

There is useful information on the internet, but also much that is misleading or wrong.

We suggest you follow these guidelines:

- Look for quality assurances such as a statement that the website follows the 'Health on the Net Foundation code of conduct'.
- Look for respected medical journals such as the *British Medical Journal* (www.bmj.com) or research databases such as the Cochrane Collaboration (www.cochrane.org).
- Be aware that overseas internet sites may contain information about treatments unavailable or unrecognised in New Zealand.
- Be aware that internet sites are unregulated. People selling products or services can post information about their products without making their business interests clear.
- Discuss any information you find on the internet with your doctor before making any changes to your treatment.
- Be aware, if you ask a doctor in another country for advice, that he or she might not be subject to the same standards as New Zealand doctors. The Council cannot guarantee the qualifications and experience of any doctor not registered in New Zealand and if something goes wrong the New Zealand authorities might not be able to hold overseas doctors to account.

While we encourage you to use the internet to research your condition and treatment, this should not take the place of a face-to-face consultation with your doctor.

For more information, see the Council's *Statement on use of the internet and electronic communication*. A copy of this is on the Council's website www.mcnz.org.nz

Cosmetic procedures

Before having a cosmetic procedure, think carefully about the results you expect and make sure you have all the information you need to make a properly informed decision.

Be cautious when choosing someone to perform the procedure. Your doctor is the best person to ask for advice.

The Council is developing guidelines for doctors who perform cosmetic procedures. They will be on our website www.mcnz.org.nz from late 2006.

Doctors and specialist titles

Most GPs have done specialist (vocational) training. These GPs, and doctors trained as specialists who work as consultants in hospitals and/or private practice, have vocational registration with the Medical Council.

Medical titles are often confusing. Be careful of titles such as 'cosmetic surgeon' or 'appearance medicine specialist' because they may not mean much. To make sure your doctor is a specialist in his or her field, find out which specialist field (vocational scope) he or she is registered in. A vocational registration shows a doctor has done advanced training in a specialty area or branch of medicine.

What are 'vocationally registered' doctors?

Vocationally registered doctors are the most senior doctors. They hold a fellowship or postgraduate qualification and are registered with the Council as specialists. Your doctor could be vocationally registered. Ask if your doctor is vocationally registered, or check on the online register on the Council website www.mcnz.org.nz.

Vocational registration helps protect you as a patient. If you are being treated in a private hospital paid for by private medical insurance, the doctor(s) treating you must be vocationally registered or your claim may not be approved.

Vocational scopes

Vocational scopes include established specialties like paediatrics, dermatology and surgery as well as more recent ones like sports medicine and sexual health. New scopes emerge as medical knowledge grows.

Below is a list of the vocational scopes at time of publication. For an explanation of what each scope involves, go to the Council website, www.mcnz.org.nz

Accident and medical practice
Anaesthesia
Breast medicine
Cardiothoracic surgery
Clinical genetics
Dermatology
Diagnostic and interventional radiology
Emergency medicine
Family planning / reproductive health
General practice
General surgery
Intensive care medicine
Internal medicine
Medical administration
Musculoskeletal medicine
Neurosurgery
Obstetrics and gynaecology
Occupational medicine
Ophthalmology
Oral and maxillofacial surgery
Orthopaedic surgery
Otolaryngology head and neck surgery
Paediatric surgery
Paediatrics
Palliative medicine
Pathology
Plastic and reconstructive surgery
Psychiatry
Public health medicine
Radiation oncology
Rehabilitation medicine
Sexual health medicine
Sports medicine
Urology
Vascular surgery

Complaints

To make a complaint about your doctor, contact:

The Health and Disability Commissioner
P O Box 1791
Auckland
Freephone: 0800 11 22 33
Fax: 09 373 1061
Email: hdc@hdc.org.nz
Website: www.hdc.org.nz

Note: The Medical Council and the Health and Disability Commissioner are responsible only for the standards of doctors who practise in New Zealand



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