



Statement on advertising

Introduction

1. The Medical Council believes that clear and accurate information about the services provided by doctors benefits all parties in the healthcare system. The Council also believes that constraints to a doctor's freedom of expression should be minimal and reasonable.
2. However, advertising can have adverse consequences for patients when it is false, misleading or deceptive, leads to the provision of inappropriate or unnecessary health services, or creates unrealistic expectations.
3. The purpose of this statement is to protect the public from advertising that is false, misleading or deceptive¹, and to provide guidance to doctors about the advertising of health-related products and services. This will support the appropriate use of health resources and ensure that patients are able to make informed decisions about their health care².
4. A number of standards exist which already provide some guidance on the subject of advertising. These standards include legislation which deals with advertising in general and standards for health-related advertising set by the Advertising Standards Authority. This document provides an overview of those standards, and also outlines additional expectations Council has of doctors who advertise. The statement may be used by the Advertising Standards Authority, the Health Practitioners Disciplinary Tribunal, the Council, and the Health and Disability Commissioner as a standard by which a doctor's conduct is measured.

Definition

5. For the purposes of this statement, advertising includes, but is not limited to, any public communication using television, radio, motion picture, newspaper, billboard, list, display, the internet or directory, and includes business cards, announcement cards, office signs, letterhead, telephone directory listings, professional lists, professional directory listings and similar professional notices, and which is intended to promote health services, health-related products, a doctor or a clinic or group with which a doctor is associated.
6. Importantly this definition excludes material issued to patients during consultations where such material is designed to provide the patient with clinical or technical information about health conditions or procedures and where the patient is afforded sufficient opportunity to discuss and ask questions about the material. Also, this definition is not intended to apply to material issued by a person or organisation for the purpose of public health information or as part of a public health programme.

Responsibility for content

7. You are expected to take reasonable steps to control the content of any advertisement of your health-related services and products, regardless of authorship.

¹ False, misleading or deceptive advertising can also give rise to a breach of the Fair Trading Act 1986 which carries penalties in the order of \$60,000 in respect of an individual and \$200,000 in respect of a body corporate.

² As required by Right 6 of the Code of Health and Disability Services Consumers' Rights.

8. If you are in sole practice or a partnership you cannot delegate responsibility for ensuring compliance with this statement to an administrator, manager, director or any other person. If you hold responsibility for management or governance within a corporate organisation you may reasonably be held responsible for the content of any advertising published by that organisation.
9. You also have some responsibility in situations in which you make yourself available, or provide information to, media reports, magazine articles, “reality” shows or advertorials. In such circumstances, you are responsible for the comments you make and the information you provide.
10. The Council may view failure to take reasonable steps to control content under these circumstances as constituting unprofessional conduct.

Council’s expectations

11. Advertisements must contain truthful and balanced representations³. When you choose to make a claim or include scientific information in advertising, it should:
 - be presented in a manner that is valid, evidence based and substantiated
 - be readily understood by the audience to whom it is directed
 - be from a reputable and verifiable source⁴
 - identify clearly the relevant researchers, sponsors and the publication where the results on which any scientific evidence or claims are based appear.

Although you should always discuss different treatment options with patients⁵, you should not make direct comparisons between the quality of your services and the quality of services your colleagues provide.

12. Advertisements must not encourage, or be likely to encourage, inappropriate or excessive use of health resources. You must not put pressure on people to use a service, for example, by arousing ill-founded fear for their future health.
13. Advertisements must not unduly glamorise products and services or foster unrealistic expectations. Testimonials⁶ can create unrealistic expectation of outcomes in patients and must not be used or quoted in your advertising or on any websites, social media forums or any other platforms you control that advertise your services.⁷
14. You should use any images in your advertising with caution. Images, particularly “before and after” photos, have a significant potential to mislead or deceive, to convey to a member of the public inappropriately high expectations of a successful outcome and to encourage the unnecessary use of services. If you choose to use “before and after” photos you must ensure that they:
 - Are there solely for the purpose of providing accurate and useful information to patients.
 - Show a realistic portrayal of the outcome that can reasonably and typically be expected.
 - Only depict patients who have undergone the advertised procedure while under your (or your services’) care.
 - Have not been altered in any way.
 - Use the same lighting, contrast, background, framing, camera angle, exposure and other photographic techniques in both the “before” and “after” images.

³ Making a claim without reasonable grounds is an offence under the Fair Trading Act 1986.

⁴ For example, peer reviewed research that has been published in an academic journal.

⁵ As required by Right 6(1)(b) of the Code of Health and Disability Services Consumers’ Rights.

⁶ Testimonial has its ordinary meaning of a recommendation or positive statement made by another person, for example, about a doctor’s care, skill, expertise or treatment. Testimonials include expressions of appreciation or esteem, a character reference or a statement of the benefits received from the care provided. Testimonials are not limited to comments from patients but may also include feedback and endorsements from colleagues, other health care professionals, friends, family and other persons in the doctor’s network.

⁷ You must not encourage patients to leave testimonials on websites or other platforms you control that advertise your or your practice’s services, nor should you encourage patients to submit testimonials about your or your practice’s services to third party websites. It is your responsibility to monitor regularly the contents of such websites or platforms and to remove any testimonials that are posted there. However, you are not responsible for any unsolicited testimonials or comments that are published on a website, in social media or other forms of media over which you do not have control.

- Ensure consistency in posture, clothing and make up.
 - Are only used when the patient has given his or her fully informed consent.
15. Advertisements must not prey on the vulnerability of particular audiences, and you should be careful how your advertising represents vulnerable groups.
16. Advertising titles, qualifications or memberships may be useful in providing the public with information about experience and expertise, but may be misleading or deceptive if patients can interpret the advertisements readily to imply that you are more skilled or have greater experience than is the case.
You must advertise only those titles, qualifications or memberships that have been:
- approved for the purposes of registration and relate to your vocational scope of practice
 - conferred or approved by your College, or another training organisation that has been accredited by the Council, or another New Zealand responsible authority.
- Medicine is full of acronyms, and many of these have the potential to confuse patients rather than inform them. Because of this, you should avoid using abbreviations of qualifications in your advertising – at least at the first appearance of that title in any given advertisement. For example, you should use “Fellow of the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons” rather than “FRACS” the first time it is used in any promotional material.
17. You must not advertise your services by visiting, emailing or telephoning prospective patients, either in person or through an agent⁸.
18. Doctors are not permitted to endorse medicines, medical products or medical treatments under section 58(1) of the Medicines Act 1981. The New Zealand Medical Association (NZMA) Code of Ethics also states that doctors should not allow their standing as medical practitioners to be used inappropriately in the endorsement of commercial products. When doctors are acting as agents for, or have a financial or other interest in, commercial organisations or products, their interest should be declared. If endorsing a product, doctors should use only the proper chemical name for drugs, vaccines and specific ingredients, rather than the trade or commercial name. Any endorsement should be based on specific independent scientific evidence, and that evidence should be clearly outlined. The Council agrees with this view.
19. If you advertise by means of discount coupons or gift certificates, you must ensure that these do not undermine your relationship with the patient and the informed consent process. In particular, you must ensure that your coupon or certificate is clear that:
- purchase of the certificate or coupon does not equate to granting informed consent
 - prior to treatment you will discuss treatment options with the patient
 - the patient has the right to opt out of treatment at any time
 - you will not provide the requested treatment if your assessment indicates that the patient is not a suitable candidate
 - you will only use a title with the understanding that you are professionally accountable for the training, ongoing Professional Development and recertification in that area.
20. It is not appropriate to offer medical treatments as prizes or gifts where this is done to promote a commercial service or for financial gain.

Concerns about advertising

21. If you are not sure whether an advertisement meets legal, industry and Council requirements then you should consider making use of the Therapeutic Advertising Pre-Vetting Service (TAPS). TAPS is a commercial service provided under the auspices of the Association of New Zealand Advertisers and is intended to assist advertisers with compliance issues. You can contact TAPS at anza@anza.co.nz or on (09) 488 7455.

⁸ It is permitted to contact former patients if this is for the purpose of re-enrolling them into a Primary Health Organisation (PHO).

22. If you have a concern about advertising you should contact the Council. Where advertising appears to breach a code or law the Council may refer complaints to another agency, such as the Advertising Standards Complaints Board or the Commerce Commission.
23. At the conclusion of an investigation by another agency the Council may initiate a conduct review which could result in additional sanctions.

Related statements

- The Council's statement on *Doctors and health-related commercial organisations*
- The NZMA *Code of Ethics for the New Zealand medical profession*
- The Code of Health and Disability Services Consumers' Rights
- The Fair Trading Act 1986
- The Consumer Guarantees Act 1993
- The Medicines Act 1981
- The Therapeutic and Health Advertising Code

All advertising of health-related goods and services must comply with the above standards. Some of the requirements of the Medicines Act 1981 and the Therapeutic and Health Advertising Code are outlined below⁹.

Requirements of the Medicines Act 1981

Part 4 of the Medicines Act 1981 sets out legal requirements specific to medical advertisements. Section 58 specifically prohibits the publication of medical advertisements to the public that:

- Claim, indicate or suggest that a medicine, medical device or treatment will prevent, alleviate, or cure a range of diseases, or prevent, reduce, or terminate a range of physiological conditions – listed in Schedules 1 and 2 of the Act. However, the Act also states that “it shall be a good defence in a prosecution [for a breach of section 58] if the defendant proves that the matter claimed, indicated or suggested in the advertisement is true.”
- Claim, indicate or suggest a medicine, medical device, or method of treatment:
 - Is a panacea or infallible; or
 - Is or has been used or recommended by a practitioner, nurse, pharmacist, or person engaged in study or research in relation to any of those professions or the work they perform; or
 - Has beneficially affected the health of a particular person or class of persons, whether named or unnamed, and whether real or fictitious, referred to in the advertisement; or
 - Invites correspondence or the sending of hair, blood, urine, or other bodily specimens or photographs for the purposes of diagnosis or treatment concerning any disease or physiological condition.

The Act also outlines comprehensive requirements that must be complied with when advertising medicines and medical devices. The Act further forbids advertising of unapproved products, and medicines imported by a practitioner or supplied under section 29.

Requirements of the Therapeutic and Health Advertising Code

The Therapeutic and Health Advertising Code covers all words and visual depictions in all advertising for therapeutic products (medicines and medical devices), natural health products and dietary supplements, health services and methods of treatment. It may also apply when therapeutic or health claims are made in advertisements for other products or services not defined in this Code. It includes the following principles:

- Advertisements should comply with the laws of New Zealand and the appropriate industry code of ethics.

⁹ Legislation, regulations and standards may be updated from time to time, and you should refer to the most recent edition.

- Advertisements should observe a high standard of social responsibility particularly as consumers often rely on such products, devices and services for their health and well-being.
- Advertisements should not by implication, omission, ambiguity or exaggerated claim mislead, deceive or confuse, or be likely to mislead, deceive or confuse consumers, abuse the trust of or exploit the lack of knowledge of consumers, or without justifiable reason, play on fear.
- Any scientific information in an advertisement should be presented in an accurate manner. Scientific terminology should be appropriate, clearly communicated and able to be readily understood by the audience to whom it is directed.
- Advertisements should not claim or imply endorsement by any government agency, professional body or independent agency unless there is prior consent, the endorsement is current, verifiable and the agency or the body is named.

Requirements of the Code of Health and Disability Services Consumers' Rights

Rights 2, 5, 6 and 7 of the Code outline the expectations of health providers in communicating with their patients, obtaining informed consent and assisting them to make informed choices. Right 6 is particularly relevant in the context of advertising, and outlines that:

- 1) Every consumer has the right to the information that a reasonable consumer, in that consumer's circumstances, would expect to receive, including -
 - a) An explanation of his or her condition; and
 - b) An explanation of the options available, including an assessment of the expected risks, side effects, benefits, and costs of each option; and
 - c) Advice of the estimated time within which the services will be provided; and
 - d) Notification of any proposed participation in teaching or research, including whether the research requires and has received ethical approval; and
 - e) Any other information required by legal, professional, ethical, and other relevant standards; and
 - f) The results of tests; and
 - g) The results of procedures.
- 2) Before making a choice or giving consent, every consumer has the right to the information that a reasonable consumer, in that consumer's circumstances, needs to make an informed choice or give informed consent.
- 3) Every consumer has the right to honest and accurate answers to questions relating to services, including questions about -
 - a) The identity and qualifications of the provider; and
 - b) The recommendation of the provider; and
 - c) How to obtain an opinion from another provider; and
 - d) The results of research.
- 4) Every consumer has the right to receive, on request, a written summary of information provided.

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This statement is scheduled for review by November 2021. Legislative changes may make this statement obsolete before this review date. The contents of this statement supersede any inconsistencies in earlier versions of the statement.
