

## **Advertising and Publicity**

It is the position of the North Carolina Medical Board that advertising or publicity that is deceptive, false, or misleading constitutes unprofessional conduct under the Medical Practice Act.\*

The term “advertising” includes oral, written and other types of communication disseminated by or at the direction of a licensee for the purpose of encouraging or soliciting the use of the licensee’s services. At issue is whether a member of the general public would be confused or deceived by the advertising in question. The following general principles are intended to assist licensees in meeting the Board’s expectations: (1) advertisements should not contain false claims or misrepresentations of fact, either expressly or by implication; (2) advertisements should not omit material facts; and (3) licensees should be prepared to substantiate claims made in advertisements.

Licensees should avoid advertising and publicity that create unjustified medical expectations, that are accompanied by deceptive claims, or that imply exclusive or unique skills or remedies. Similarly, a statement that a licensee has cured or successfully treated a large number of patients suffering a particular ailment is deceptive if it implies a certainty of results and/or creates unjustified or misleading expectations. When using patient photographs, they should be of the licensee’s own patients and demonstrate realistic outcomes. Likewise, when a change of circumstances renders advertising inaccurate or misleading, the licensee is expected to make reasonable efforts to correct the advertising within a reasonable time frame.

The advent of the Internet and the proliferation of websites purporting to “rate” healthcare providers mean that licensees cannot always control information about themselves in the public domain. However, a licensee is expected to exercise reasonable efforts to bring about the correction or elimination of false or misleading information when he or she becomes aware of it.

### **Physicians Advertising Board Certification**

The term “board certified” is publicly regarded as evidence of the skill and training of a physician carrying this designation. Accordingly, in order to avoid misleading or deceptive advertising concerning board certification, physicians are expected to meet the following guidelines.

No physician should advertise or otherwise hold himself or herself out to the public as being “board certified” without proof of current certification by a specialty board approved by the (1) American Board of Medical Specialties (ABMS); (2) the Bureau of Osteopathic Specialists of the American Osteopathic Association (AOA-BOS); (3) the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada (RCPSC); or (4) a board that meets the following requirements:

- i. the organization requires satisfactory completion of a training program with training, documentation and clinical requirements similar in scope and complexity to ACGME- or AOA-approved programs, in the specialty or subspecialty field of medicine in which the physician seeks certification. Solely experiential or on-the-job training is not sufficient;

- ii. the organization requires all physicians seeking certification to successfully pass a written or oral examination or both, which tests the applicant's knowledge and skill in the specialty or subspecialty area of medicine. All examinations require a psychometric evaluation for validation;
- iii. the organization requires diplomates to recertify every ten years or less, and the recertification requires, at a minimum, passage of a written examination;
- iv. the organization prohibits all certification and recertification candidates from attempting more than three times in three years to pass the examination;
- v. the organization has written by-laws and a code of ethics to guide the practice of its members and an internal review and control process including budgetary practices to ensure effective utilization of resources;
- vi. the organization has written proof of a determination by the Internal Revenue Service that the certifying organization is tax-exempt under Section 501(c) of the Internal Revenue Code; and
- vii. the organization has a permanent headquarters and staff sufficient to respond to consumer and regulatory inquiries.

Any physician advertising or otherwise holding himself or herself out to the public as "board certified" should disclose in the advertisement the specialty board by which the physician was certified. A physician is expected to maintain and provide to the Board upon request evidence of current board certification. In the case of physicians who have been certified by non-ABMS, non-AOA and non-RCPSA boards, the physician is expected to maintain and provide to the Board upon request evidence that the certifying board meets the criteria listed above.

The above limitations are only intended to apply to physicians who advertise or otherwise hold themselves out to the public as being "board certified." The above criteria are not applicable in other instances, such as employment determinations, privileging or credentialing decisions, membership on insurance panels, or setting reimbursement rates.

\*Business letterheads, envelopes, cards, and similar materials are understood to be forms of advertising and publicity for the purpose of this Position Statement.