Specialty certification vs. special interest: physicians are required to be clear about the distinction [1]

The College has received complaints about how physicians post their credentials, most commonly concerning cosmetic services. Registrants are reminded of their legal obligation to present their credentials in a manner that is transparent and unambiguous to the lay public.

The following are excerpts from section 7-4 of the College Bylaws:

(3) A registrant must not identify himself or herself as a specialist unless he or she has certification from the RCPSC or equivalent accrediting body approved by the board and must not use the term “surgeon” in advertising for cosmetic procedures unless he or she is a specialist in a relevant surgical discipline.

(4) No one other than a registrant who is a certificant or fellow of the RCPSC or who has completed postgraduate training in his or her specialty satisfactory to the registration committee may indicate on his or her letterhead or office door or otherwise represent him/herself as holding such specialist qualifications.

(5) A registrant may refer to having a special interest in an area of medicine but when doing so must

(a) state whether he or she is a general practitioner or a specialist,
(b) if the registrant is a specialist, state his or her RCPSC certification or equivalent as approved by the board, and
(c) provide information to assist patients’ understanding of his or her qualifications so that patients may make informed choices about their health or well-being.

(7) A registrant who produces, writes, edits or pays for a professional advertisement is considered responsible and accountable for the content.

Complaints typically arise when College registrants qualified as family physicians allow themselves to be perceived by the public as dermatologists or plastic surgeons. This can take many forms: the presentation of credentials without the clear explanation and formatting required by the Bylaws; interviews with news media which leave the impression that the practitioner is a specialist; or
optimizing internet search engines such that the physician is erroneously identified as a specialist.

The College Bylaws are clear: a specialist physician holds specialist training and certification recognized by the College. Non-specialist physicians must clearly identify themselves as such. For example, the designation “skin care specialist” is only acceptable for dermatologists. A family physician with an interest in dermatology must be clearly described as a “family physician with an interest in dermatology.”

The standard format on letterhead, business cards, signage, web pages and anything else where the identity and qualifications of the physician are posted should be:

- Name of physician
- Certified specialist in [Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada discipline] or
- Family Physician/General Practitioner
- Special interest in [description of area of special interest]

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