

# Advertising and Communication with the Public

## Public Resource

### What to Expect

The College of Physicians and Surgeons of British Columbia (the College) is committed to your protection and safety. This is a summary of what you can expect of your physician or surgeon when they advertise or promote their medical services, the clinic or facility where they practise, or themselves to the public.

A physician or surgeon may advertise their medical services in:

- online or printed publications
- television or radio
- social media/blog posts
- signs that are displayed in their practice setting

Most often, physicians and surgeons advertise their services to let patients know what type of medicine they practise (e.g. full-service primary care or psychiatry).

Sometimes physicians and surgeons advertise for commercial purposes when they offer services that are not covered by the provincial Medical Services Plan (e.g. for elective or cosmetic surgery, or treatments such as IV vitamin therapy). These types of uninsured services are paid directly by the patient.

Regardless of the purpose for advertising, all physicians and surgeons must follow the same rules. These rules are imposed by the College in a practice standard, as well as in national requirements for advertising such as the [Canadian Code of Advertising Standards](#) and the [Regulatory Requirements for Advertising](#) issued by Health Canada.

### When advertising and communicating with the public, a physician or surgeon must:

- use their correct credentials,
- use relevant and accurate information,
- be clear about their services and what patients have to pay for,
- not offer prizes, gifts, gift certificates, card points, bonus points, discounts or time-limited benefits for medical services or for attendance at informational sessions promoting medical interventions, cosmetic or otherwise
- not include “before and after” photos, unless they have written consent from the patient to use their photographs in advertisements and include a disclaimer if they use stock photos of models who have received the same treatment but not from them,
- not compare themselves to other physicians or surgeons or imply they are “better” than anyone else, and
- not make promises about results.

## Why do physicians and surgeons choose to advertise?

Physicians and surgeons advertise to let patients know what types of medical services they offer. It is also helpful for other physicians and surgeons to know what services are offered so they can make appropriate referrals.

## How can physicians and surgeons advertise themselves?

The services a physician or surgeon can provide depends on the education and training they have completed. Their training also determines the title they are allowed to use. For instance, only some physicians and surgeons can call themselves specialists.

There are two types of specialists: those who are certified by the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada (RCPSC) in a specialty (e.g. cardiologist, neurologist, surgeon); and those who are certified by the College of Family Physicians of Canada (CFPC) in family or emergency medicine.

For example, you may see:

- Dr. D. John, CCFP, specialist in family medicine
- Dr. L. Su, FRCPC, cardiology

At times, understanding a physician or surgeon's title and credentials can be confusing. It is always okay to ask for clarification.

For example: Your family physician likely has a good understanding of skin health and may prescribe you certain medications or topical treatments for conditions such as acne. If there are more severe underlying issues affecting your skin, your family physician may refer you to see a specialist in dermatology. A specialist in dermatology has gone through more specific and extensive training in skin issues and diseases and can treat more complex problems.

A family physician cannot call themselves a dermatologist or say they provide dermatology services, even if they are able to treat some skin conditions.

For example, you may see:

- Dr. K. Lynn, CCFP, specialist in family medicine with a practice focused on skin conditions
- Dr. P. Roberts, FRCPC, dermatology

Similarly, some family physicians provide pregnancy care. However, an obstetrician is a specialist who has gone through longer and more specific training about pregnancy and can handle more complex pregnancies and deliveries than a family physician. Both are well equipped to care for pregnant patients when there are no major complications.

For example, you may see:

- Dr. S. Chow, CCFP, specialist in family medicine with a practice focused on maternity care
- Dr. R. Khan, FRCSC, obstetrics and gynecology

Some family physicians do have extra training in specific areas and have certificates from the CFPC, listed [here](#). These physicians may use a different title based on the focus of their practice such as sports medicine or addiction medicine.