



Guideline for self-treatment and treating family members

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This version replaces the Guideline for self-treatment and treating relatives (version 5)

Summary: **The Council has endorsed a set of principles of best practice in relation to medical practitioners treating themselves or members of their family.**

Applies to: Registered medical practitioners practising in NSW

Author: Medical Council of NSW

Owner: Medical Council of NSW

Related legislation, Awards, Policy and Agreements: Good Medical Practice: A Code of Conduct for Doctors in Australia 2014, Medical Board of Australia;
Medical Certificate Guidelines 2012, Medical Council of NSW;
The Births Deaths and Marriages Registration Act 1995;
The Public Health Regulation 2012.

Review date: December 2020

Guideline for self-treatment and treating family members

BACKGROUND

The Medical Board of Australia's Code of Conduct (Good Medical Practice: A Code of Conduct for Doctors in Australia, 2014) sets out the expectations of medical practitioners with regards to treating themselves and those with whom they have a close personal relationship.

Section 9.2.2 – Your Health

Good medical practice involves *“seeking independent, objective advice when you need medical care, and being aware of the risks of self-diagnosis and self-treatment”*.

Section 3.14 – Personal Relationships

“Whenever possible, avoid providing medical care to anyone with whom you have a close personal relationship. In most cases, providing care to close friends, those you work with and family members is inappropriate because of the lack of objectivity, possible discontinuity of care, and risks to the doctor and patient. In some cases, providing care to those close to you is unavoidable. Whenever this is the case, good medical practice requires recognition and careful management of these issues”.

Noting that all Australian medical practitioners are expected to practice in accordance with the Medical Board of Australia's Code of Conduct, the Medical Council of New South Wales (the Council) supplements the above with the following:

Wherever possible, medical practitioners should not treat themselves and members of their family, because in these circumstances:

- Professional objectivity may be compromised and their judgment may be influenced by the nature of their relationship with the patient;
- Medical practitioners may fail to explore sensitive areas when taking a medical history or may fail to perform an appropriate physical examination;
- The patient may feel uncomfortable disclosing sensitive information or undergoing a physical examination when the medical practitioner is a family member;
- Patient autonomy may be compromised when a medical practitioner treats a member of their family;
- The principles of informed consent may not be adhered to when a medical practitioner treats a member of their family.

For the same reasons, the Council includes in this guideline the issuing of certificates by medical practitioners for members of their family, including medical certificates, death certificates and cremation documents. The preparation of such documents for family members carries an inherent risk of compromising a medical practitioner's professional objectivity and clinical judgment.

GUIDELINE

The Council endorses the Medical Board of Australia's Code of Conduct's guidance in relation to self-treatment and treating family members. In addition, the Council endorses the following general principles:

- 1 All medical practitioners should have their own, independent General Practitioner.
- 2 Medical practitioners should not initiate treatment (including prescribing) for themselves or members of their family.
- 3 In emergency situations or isolated settings where there is no help available, medical practitioners may treat themselves or members of their family until another medical practitioner becomes available.
- 4 Medical practitioners should not serve as primary or regular care providers for members of their family, although there are circumstances in which they may work together with an independent medical practitioner to maintain established treatment.
- 5 Medical practitioners should not issue medical certificates for themselves or members of their family.
- 6 Medical practitioners should not issue death certificates or cremation documents for members of their family.

KEY DEFINITIONS

Death certificate: a medical certificate of cause of death under *The Births, Deaths and Marriages Registration Act 1995*.

Cremation documents: documents issued under *The Public Health Regulation 2012* including the attending practitioner's cremation certificate, and cremation permit.

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