

Advertising by General Practitioners

Introduction:

Definition of 'Advertise' (as given in the Oxford dictionary):

Promote publicly to increase sales; make generally known, seek to sell, fill (vacancy) or (& for) buy or employ by notice in news paper etc.

In this article, what we are concerned as advertising is giving information about General Practitioners and their activities to others. In this context and with reference to above definition what are relevant are the first two phrases in the definition, namely 'promote publicly to increase sales & make generally known'.

In the medical profession, the first phrase, namely 'to promote publicly to increase sales' is considered inappropriate.

The manner in which the second phrase in the definition, namely, 'make generally known' is implemented by the doctors is by provision of information in their place of work, which is regulated by the Sri Lanka medical council.

The public expects the family physicians to demonstrate professionalism while caring for their clients. In Sri Lanka the General Practitioners are in the private sector. The public expects the Family Physicians to perform their tasks to the best of their ability without much concern over the financial gain / rewards that accompanies such activities. This is also expected from the General Practitioners by the College of General practitioners and their colleagues.

All information should be factual; there should be no exaggerations or misleading statements, guarantees of cure, claims of superior qualifications, experience or skill. There should also be nothing disparaging about the services offered by other doctors (or institutions) or their qualifications, experience & skills. Information should not be presented in such a manner that it exploits the lack of medical knowledge of prospective patients. No doctor should claim that he/she is the sole authority on a particular subject or is the only person who could perform a particular procedure. No doctor should advertise his successes in treatment.

Further, information provided should not place any General Practitioner at an undue advantage.

To put it simply, the information given by a General Practitioner to the clients should solely serve as information and should not be given with an intention to attract more clients

In General Practice, it is perceived that clients prefer doctors who provide quality care.

Taking the above into consideration, together with the Sri Lanka Medical Council guidelines on advertising by doctors, the following approach are recommended by the Values Committee of the College of General Practitioners of Sri Lanka for adoption by the membership

1. Information to be displayed at the office:

Name/s of the practicing general Practitioner/s.

Qualifications

Hours of work

Contact Details

Services Provided

These information can be displayed either outside the building on the name boards or within the premises.

The above Information can be printed on the medicinal drug envelopes and labels. Further these information may also be permitted on the letter heads Frank / seal, medical certificates, visiting cards or any other documents used by the General Practitioner.

2. Advertising by individual doctors in the media:

This is permissible provided the information given in the advertisement confines to what is displayed in the doctors' office, as given in Para. 1, above. However, it should be noted that the Sri Lanka Medical Council guidance in this matter is as follows: 'Doctors may not advertise in newspapers or the electronic media'. 'Media' includes, print, electronic, social and website

3. Advertising in the Telephone Directories: List of all the doctors practicing in an area with relevant information as given in Para 1 above is permitted.

4. Talks & Discussions over the radio & TV on medical issues to the public:

The names, qualifications and their specialties of the participating doctors could be mentioned.. Participating doctors in collaboration with the organizers should ensure that no further information regarding the doctors is divulged to the listeners. This applies specially to their place of work, their availability etc. In the event listeners request for such information the participating doctors &/or the organizers should explain to them the ethical aspect on giving such information and politely turn down their request. The onus should be on the participating doctors to see that this is adhered to. It is preferable if more than one doctor of a particular discipline participate in the programme. These talks / discussions should not be broadcast frequently or presented in such a manner as to imply that the doctor concerned is especially recommended for patients to consult. Identifying the doctor(s) at the beginning and at the end of the programme is sufficient.

5. Writing Articles in the newspapers & non medical journals on medical issues:

Here too the author/s can give only their name/s, qualifications, their specialties & details of any other past publications, where necessary. The author/s along with those responsible for publication should ensure that no further information regarding the author/s is given to the readers, as given in Para 4 above.

Articles written by doctors should not be accompanied by advertisement of services referred to in such articles, in the same publication.

6. Advertising within the profession:

This is fully permitted, provided this is done with the sole idea of informing their colleagues regarding the services available so that it may be useful for the doctors for patient care. This may be in the form of directories etc. distributed among the colleagues & medical institutions. They may also be published in professional Journals, circulars and newsletters intended for circulation to members of medical profession.

7. Displaying advertising materials on pharmaceuticals at the place of work:

If this is done by the General Practitioners it amounts to advertising of those drugs by the General practitioners, though inadvertently and gives the impression to their clients that those drugs are approved by their doctors and hence good for them too. Clients may be inclined to use those drugs without their doctors' prescription, which could be harmful to them.

This applies to any material given by the drug firms with the name(s) of the drug(s) inscribed on it. This could be in the form of calendars, prescription pads, pens and any other accessories used during patient care.

8. Displaying names of the other institutions used by the General Practitioners for patient care at the place of work: e.g.: 'Collection centre for investigation materials for such & such an institution etc.' This amounts to placing those institutions at an undue advantage over other such institutions. Further, it may amount to 'splitting of fees' between the doctor and the institution concerned, which is not permitted as per Sri Lanka Medical Council rules.

Reference:

Guidelines on ethical conduct for Medical & Dental practitioners registered with the Sri Lanka Medical Council – A Sri Lanka Medical Council Publication.