



Professional Standard and Guidelines on Complementary and Alternative Therapies

This document is a physician **standard** and **guidelines** approved by the Council of the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Nova Scotia.

A **standard** reflects the minimum professional and ethical behaviour, conduct or practice expected by the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Nova Scotia. Physicians licensed with the College are required to be familiar with and comply with the College **standards**.

Guidelines contain recommendations endorsed by the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Nova Scotia. The College encourages its members to be familiar with and to follow its **guidelines** whenever possible and appropriate. Note that **guidelines** may contain references to College **standards**.

Preamble

By and large, physicians are trusted by their patients and the public. The opinions and utterances of physicians hold weight and carry the authority of being backed by science. As such, whenever a physician works in a controversial field, that physician must take pains to disclose the known from the unknown, the evidence from the theory, so as not to unduly rely on the credibility generally extended to physicians solely by virtue of their training or title.

Definition

For the purposes of this professional standard and guidelines, the following definition of complementary and alternative therapies is used:

[T]hose forms of treatment which are not widely used by the conventional healthcare professions, and the skills of which are not taught as part of the undergraduate curriculum of conventional medical and paramedical healthcare courses.

Source: Board of Science and Education, British Medical Association (1993). *Complementary Medicine: New Approaches to Good Practice*. Oxford University Press. ISBN 9780192861665.

Professional Standard

Physicians offering alternative therapies are held to the standards of practice of the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Nova Scotia. All physicians have a responsibility to stay current with conventional therapies that form the standards of practice. Physicians must discuss and review conventional therapies with their patients before initiating alternative therapies.

Guidelines

Ethical physicians practising in alternative therapies or who deal with patients receiving such therapies are expected to act in accordance with the following:

- Carry out appropriate and conventional examinations and investigations in order to establish a diagnosis and basis for treatment;
- Prescribe or recommend an effective and proven therapy not delayed or supplanted by the choice of a complementary or alternative treatment;
- Not expose patients to any undue risk from a complementary or alternative therapy;
- Not misrepresent the safety or efficacy of any therapy or procedure, whether conventional or unconventional;
- Not exploit the emotions, vulnerability, or finances of patients for personal gain or gratification; and
- Respect the autonomy of patients in choosing from available treatment options.

If the patient's choice of a complementary or alternative therapy makes it impossible for the physician to discharge his or her ethical responsibilities, it is acceptable for the physician to terminate the patient-physician relationship in accordance with the College's *Guidelines for Ending the Physician-Patient Relationship*.

Essential Further Reading

To learn more about the medico-legal aspects of complementary and alternative therapies, physicians are strongly encouraged to consult the following document from the Canadian Medical Protective Association (CMPA):

[Alternative medicine — What are the medico-legal concerns?](#)

Note

The College of Physicians and Surgeons of Nova Scotia thanks the College of Physicians and Surgeons of British Columbia for permitting its publication Complementary and Alternative Therapies (September 2009) to be adapted in the preparation of this document.

Document History

First approved by the Council of the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Nova Scotia: **March 21, 2014**

Approximate date of next review: **March 2017**

Unless otherwise noted, this material is © College of Physicians and Surgeons of Nova Scotia. This material may be reproduced for non-commercial purposes, in whole or in part, provided that credit is given to the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Nova Scotia or other original source identified in this document. Any other use requires permission from the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Nova Scotia.