

Episode 12 – Looking up a doctor or PA on the Board’s website

Intro music: 0:00

Podcast introduction: 0:10

Hello and thanks for joining me. I’m Jean Fisher Brinkley, Communications Director for the North Carolina Medical Board. On this episode of MedBoard Matters we are going to be talking about the most-used service provided by the Medical Board. And no, it’s not the Complaint Process.

It’s the online search tool that lets visitors to the Medical Board’s website look up any physician or PA licensed in the state. It’s called Look up a doctor or PA and you can find it right on the home page, about halfway down the screen when you visit www.ncmedboard.org.

Now, Look up a doctor or PA gets up to 3,000 hits every business day. Assuming that pattern holds year round, that’s well over 750,000 searches a year! Of course, it’s not just a search.

What makes Look up a doctor or PA valuable is the wide range of licensee information you can find by using it. I’m really proud of the North Carolina Medical Board’s work in this area.

NCMB was the first medical regulatory board to put licensee information online back in 1996. It started with not much more than a list of licensee names, license numbers and license issue and renewal dates. In the year 2000, the Board added NCMB public actions. And in 2009 the licensee pages took a quantum leap forward and added a whole lot of required and optional information. We now provide five different categories of adverse information, as well as details about a provider’s education and training and useful things such as whether the provider speaks languages other than English. Which, by the way, makes North Carolina’s licensee information pages among the most comprehensive in the nation.

Look up a doctor or PA FAQs: 1:58

So, let’s get right into it. As I mentioned, Look up a doctor or PA is the most used resource on the Medical Board website. And where there are lots of users, there are usually lots of questions. In this next segment we’re going to feature some of the most common questions we get about our licensee search, and I will answer them. I’ve asked some staff members in the Board’s operations department to help me out – these are often the people who pick up the phone when someone calls with a question. Thanks to Amy, Sara and Malinda for asking the questions.

I’m new to the area and need to find a doctor. Can you recommend one?

People often use the North Carolina Medical Board search to find a medical provider but the medical board does not make recommendations or referrals. To use Look up a doctor or PA to find a new provider, you’ll want to ignore the name search fields and search by location. You can search by city or, to look in a larger geographic area, by county. Narrow your search by license type to see a list of just physicians or just PAs. You will need to contact the provider’s practice see if they are accepting new patients and to check if they accept your insurance, but it’s a place to start. To make sure that your search includes only providers with active licenses, go to license status and select “Active”.

I need to find a specialist in my area. Can I look for one using the medical board search tool?

Yes, you can. After selecting your city or county, look for Area of Practice. Fair warning, there are a lot of them. Take the time to choose the area of practice that best matches your medical needs. It may be necessary to do multiple searches using different areas of practice to build a comprehensive list. Again, you will have to contact the practice directly to see if the specialist is accepting patients.

Will I be able to see if the provider I'm interested in has had complaints filed against them?

No. Under North Carolina law complaints are confidential. There is no public record of whether a licensee has received a complaint. If a complaint results in the North Carolina Medical Board taking public action against a licensee, then the action will be posted on the individual licensee's information page. In most instances, the public documents include many details about the misconduct that led to the regulatory action. This lets patients and other members of the public decide for themselves whether they are comfortable with the provider's history.

The physician or PA I am interested in has a Consent Order. What does that mean?

A Consent Order is the legal term for a negotiated settlement between the Medical Board and an individual licensee. If you see a Consent Order on a medical professional's information page, it means they had some issue with the Board that was resolved with the terms described in the order. The order will include basic information about the provider, such as when they were first licensed by the medical board and where they practiced medicine when the problem occurred. The order will often give an overview of what happened and note specific violations of law or professional ethics. Finally, the order specifies what actions the Board took to address the misconduct.

Keep in mind that a Consent Order is just one type of disciplinary action. Some of the other types you may see include license surrender, license denial, public letter of concern, or order of discipline. You may also see orders dissolving a disciplinary order. This happens when a licensed provider completes all the terms and conditions of their order and asks that it be ended. One of the most unique things about the medical board licensee information pages is that you can contact us if you have questions. So, if you want help understanding a provider's current status or need help making sense of a disciplinary order, give us a call.

I see that the provider I am interested in is licensed in multiple states. Can I see if they have any disciplinary history in those states?

Yes, you can. One of the types of data North Carolina added to the licensee information pages in 2009 is actions taken by other regulatory authorities. That includes medical boards in other states, as well as state and federal agencies such as the Medicaid and Medicare programs and the Drug Enforcement Administration. If the provider you are checking has any out of state or other agency actions, you will find them in the same place you would see North Carolina Medical Board Actions – on the tab marked Actions – adverse & administrative. The Other Regulatory Board or Other Agency Actions will be right below the section for North Carolina actions. North Carolina goes the extra mile to obtain a copy of the out-of-state or other action so visitors can read the action without having to go search another website.

I tried to look up a doctor using the medical board search tool and couldn't find them. Why aren't they showing up?

There are many reasons visitors may have problems getting search results when looking for a specific provider. One common reason is misspellings. If you are looking for a specific provider, make sure you confirm the spelling of their last name. If the name is Thompson, check to see if it's Thompson with or without a P, for example. Our search will return only results that are an exact match for what you type in. You can also try searching with partial names, as long as you enter at least three letters. That can be a big help if you're not sure of the spelling.

Another frequent reason for failed searches is entering content in too many of the search fields – first name, last name, city, county, license type, and so on. Less is more, with search. Best results often come from simple searches. If you know you have the correct spelling of both the first and last names, that may be enough to find your doctor. Of course, if the doctor's name is John Smith you will probably have to sift through quite a few names to find the one you are looking for. If it's a common name, it is advisable to narrow your search by county.

One last reason I'll mention that a provider doesn't show up in our search: They're not actually licensed by the North Carolina Medical Board. Sometimes people come to our site to find a podiatrist, or a chiropractor or even a dentist. We don't license them so of course they aren't going to be in our database. Check the letters after the professionals name. If it's something other than MD, DO or PA, Look up a doctor or PA probably isn't where to find them.

The PA I see for primary care left to work for a different practice, but your website still lists them as working at the old one. Can you help me find them?

Good question and I wish the answer were different, but no, usually we cannot find providers who change practices. The reason is that the medical board's licensee information pages are only as good as the data reported to us. By law, any physician or PA who changes practice address is required to notify the Medical Board of the new address within 60 days. But, that doesn't always happen.

In the meantime, here's a tip for patients who are looking for a provider who has moved on. Once you have the individual's Medical Board information page up, find the Renewal Date just under the provider's name. Licensed physicians and PAs have to renew their professional license annually and should update their practice address at that time. Check back a few weeks after the renewal date and you may find that the provider has entered their new practice address and telephone number.

Licensees in the audience – please take note of this issue. If your practice address changes you should update your information with the Board by visiting www.ncmedboard.org and logging in to the Licensure Gateway. This is the same system you login to renew your license. Make sure you keep your email addresses and telephone numbers current too.

Additional information: 9:51

We covered a lot of ground with those questions, and I hope you found the information useful. Before we move on, I want to mention three quick things that you may not know about Look up a doctor or PA but probably should.

1. **Doctors and PAs aren't the only medical professionals you can look up.** I know, I know, I just said you probably won't find anyone who doesn't have MD, DO or PA after their name using our search. But that's not 100 percent accurate. NCMB's search tool looks up any professional licensed or registered by the Board. It's true, the vast majority are either physicians or PAs, but NCMB also licenses perfusionists or LPs, and anesthesiology assistants, or AAs. Another license type you should know is RTL, which stands for resident training license. Physicians who are completing their postgraduate training usually have this type of license. Finally, the Board registers polysomnographic technologists, more commonly known as sleep techs, so you can look them up on NCMB's website too. Physicians and PAs have the most detailed licensee pages, with more types of information reported, while the other license types have more basic information.
2. **Most licensed medical professionals have no adverse information reported.** I hope this is good news. Although a lot of visitors come to the medical board website looking for disciplinary actions, the truth is that just a small percentage of licensees actually have them. According to our data, about 3 percent of licensees have a history of North Carolina public action. That means the North Carolina Medical Board has taken some type of public regulatory action. If you add in all the other types of adverse information – criminal convictions, certain malpractice payments, actions by hospitals or health systems, and actions by out of state medical board or other agencies – the percentage goes up a bit. About 6 percent of licensees have information in one or more adverse categories. If you're a glass half full kind of person like me, that means 93 percent of medical professionals licensed by the Board have clean records.
3. **Once a medical board action is posted to the Board's website, it generally stays there.** It is the North Carolina Medical Board's practice to post its regulatory actions indefinitely. In the more than two decades of posting actions on the NCMB website, indefinitely has basically meant they don't get taken down. Even when a licensee has completed all terms and conditions and requested official termination of their order. Even if the public action was taken 20 years ago. I have personally come across public action documents on our website that date back to the early 1960s. And each and every one of these public documents can be opened and read. Occasionally some of the older file types can't be viewed. If that happens, just call the Board and we'll be happy to email the document to you.

Audio tutorial: 12:56

I thought I'd finish this episode by doing a little audio tutorial on using Look up a doctor or PA. Depending on where you are right now and what you are doing, you may even want to follow along. Obviously if you are driving – two hands on the wheel. You'll have to try this later.

But if you are stationary and listening on your phone and you have a tablet nearby, or if you are in front of a laptop or desk top computer, go ahead and open a Web browser and go to www.ncmedboard.org. If you are listening on your computer, pull out your smartphone, get a browser window up and go to the NCMB website. Everybody set?

If you are on a tablet or computer, you should see the medical board logo at the top left of the screen, and if you scroll down a bit, you'll see a blue button labeled Look up a doctor or PA. If you are on a

smartphone, you will see the logo at the top of your screen. Just scroll down until you see the Look up a doctor or PA. And, once you see that button, go ahead and click on it.

Now you should see the search screen. You'll see fields for first name, last name and city. And there are drop down menus for county, area of practice and a few other search parameters. I'm going to lead you through the process of doing a basic review of a licensee page, but first we have to find a physician or PA.

Just to keep things simple, enter the name of a provider you currently see for medical care. It can be your primary care provider, or a specialist. Just choose someone whose name you know and enter it into the first name and last name search fields. If you only know the last name, go ahead and enter it. And, if it's a relatively common name, you may want to go to the county drop down menu and choose the county the provider practices in. Once you've done that, click the blue Search button.

If you're lucky and the provider you searched has a relatively uncommon name, you should now see a short list of names. Find your provider and click on the name. If you have multiple physicians or PAs with the same name, look under location to find the right one.

After clicking on the name, you should now be on that medical provider's personal information page. Congratulations – you just successfully looked up a doctor or PA.

If you are on your phone, you'll see several categories of information, with the provider's name below them. If you are on a tablet or computer, the categories should be on the left and the provider's name should be at the top of the page.

The first thing I like to do is check to see if the licensee has a valid North Carolina license. Look under the name and find License Status. If the provider is currently licensed, it will say Active. If not, then it will indicate Inactive. Now, looking in the same area, find Public Action. If there is a red "Yes" that means the licensee has North Carolina regulatory actions, and you'll want to take a closer look. We'll come back to that in a moment.

For now, keep scrolling down the page. You will see if the licensee has active supervisees, if it's a PA, the name of the primary supervising physician. If the provider has North Carolina Hospital Admitting privileges they will be noted here.

As I mentioned earlier, most licensees have no adverse history. In that situation, a good next stop is the practice information tab, which you can select from the categories on the side or the top of your screen. This is where you'll find the practice address and telephone number. And, if the licensee has elected to provide optional content, you may also see details such as a practice philosophy, non-English languages spoken, and whether the provider accepts Medicare and Medicaid and is taking new patients. Again, this is optional so these may be blank.

Our next stop is the Education, Certifications & Area of Practice tab. In my opinion, this is one of the most important pages to visit. You'll see where the provider went to medical or PA school and the year they graduated. You will also see where they completed postgraduate training and what medical specialty the training was in. If the licensee is Board Certified, the area of certification and year of certification will be listed.

The last item you will come to on this tab is Area of Practice. This is where the licensee lists the types of medicine they currently practice. It's a good idea to take a look at these and compare them to the specialty area of training under postgraduate training. In most cases, area of practice and postgraduate training match. But if they don't then you may want to get more information. For example, if a physician trained in general surgery but is currently practicing pediatrics, or provider trained in family medicine but is doing cosmetic surgery, it's reasonable to ask how that happened. What qualifies this provider to practice the type of medicine they are currently practicing? Are they the best choice for you or your family members?

I think I am probably testing the limit of how long I can expect a listener to stay with me when they may or may not be following along on their own screen, so big finish – let's talk about adverse information.

Remember that Public Action label? When NCMB has taken public action against a licensee it will have a red "Yes" there. To see the action, click on the tab marked Actions – Adverse & Administrative.

First up is North Carolina actions. They are always listed first. You will see the date the action was taken, a brief description of the action and a link to view the public documents in their entirety.

Next, is other regulatory board or agency actions. This is where you will see other state medical board actions, or actions by a state or federal agency, such as the Medicare program.

Finally, if the licensee has had hospital privileges suspended or revoked in North Carolina, it will be listed as well.

That's three of the five adverse information categories NCMB posts. For number four, select the Malpractice tab from the category list at the top or side of your screen. If there are any payments that meet criteria for posting under North Carolina law, they will be listed. A payments is public only if it occurred on or after May 1, 2008 and was \$75,000 or more.

Finally, the fifth and final type of adverse information reported on NCMB's licensee information pages is Convictions. Find it on the category list and click to see if any are reported. The Board posts certain misdemeanor convictions, including DUI and DWI, as well as felony convictions.

Again, the vast majority of North Carolina physicians or PAs don't have any adverse information. But it's smart to check every tab, just in case.

I'm going to end the tour there, though there are a few more categories of optional content I encourage you to explore as you research medical providers on our website. It's a good idea to look up any new provider before you see them. I also like to recommend checking existing providers' pages at least once a year, just to see if anything has changed.

Whew. Thank you so much for hanging in there with me. For those of you who were able to follow along, I hope you successfully completed a search and will continue to use Look up a doctor or PA. If you couldn't do your own search, I hope you will visit the medical board website and test drive Look up a doctor or PA another time. As it happens, we just posted a short video on using the search tool on the site, just in case you need a refresher.

Podcast wrap-up: 20:45

That brings me to the end of another episode of MedBoard Matters. Thank you for listening. If you found this episode helpful, tell your family and friends. One of the medical board's biggest challenges is just letting the public know we are here. You can help by sharing this episode and encouraging the people you know to use our licensee search.

I'm Jean Fisher Brinkley. Join me again.