Intro music: 0:00

Podcast Introduction: 0:09
Hello, and thanks for joining me. I'm your host Jean Fisher Brinkley.

In mid-March, just days before its regularly scheduled Board Meeting, the North Carolina Medical Board closed its offices to visitors. Virtually all staff transitioned almost overnight to full time work from home. The Board Meeting went forward with a shortened schedule, handling critical business only. In-person interviews with licensees or license applicants were cancelled. And while Board Members attended that March meeting in person, most staff listened in by telephone.

At the time, just like everyone else, the Medical Board really had no idea how long the coronavirus pandemic would last. But within a few weeks, it became clear that we wouldn't be going back to normal any time soon. Which left the Board in a tricky situation.

For the most part Medical Board staff found that they could, in fact, do most or all of their work remotely. But how could we pull off a Board Meeting?

The Board Meeting is the main event, the show. Many aspects of the Board's work simply cannot move forward without the Board Meeting. It's where decisions are made about how to proceed in disciplinary and licensing cases. It's when Board Members sit down for confidential interviews with licensees under investigation or license applicants – and some of these folks travel great distances to meet. There are policy meetings, presentations from outside groups, training for Board Members and staff. And the list goes on. It is a complex multi-day event that can easily involve more than 100 people.

At the time, public gatherings were limited, as they are now in fact, to no more than 10 people.

So, in late April, the medical board decided that it's May meeting would be its first-ever 100 percent virtual Board Meeting. In this episode of MedBoard Matters we are going to talk about our experiences presenting virtual meetings, and share details on how you can listen in.

I've asked Todd Brosius, one of the Medical Board's senior attorneys, and chair of our Virtual Board Meeting workgroup to help me out. But first, I'm going to go over some Board Meeting Basics in a segment we call, the two-minute drill.

Two-minute drill Segment: 2:22

1. When are Board Meetings held? The Board meets every other month in the odd numbered months – so in January, March, May and so on, and usually in the third or fourth week of the month. Meetings are typically scheduled over two and a half days, opening on a Wednesday morning and adjourning by Friday around lunchtime.
2. Are Board Meetings required to be open to the public? Yes, yes there are. There are some important exceptions, but the medical board is a public body and is therefore subject to the state's Open Meetings Law. That means we have to publish the dates of our meetings and we have to post meeting agendas that give a general description of the business that will be discussed. It also means that members of the public are free to attend or listen in to portions of the meeting that are considered public under North Carolina law.
3. So what parts of the meeting are not open? As I mentioned there are some important exceptions to the Open Meetings Law. Complaint information and investigative information are

both confidential, for example. So is certain licensing information – any matter that involves a specific individual, a license application or an enforcement case for example, is going to be confidential. So, if you attend a Board Meeting, you are not going to be able to listen in to discussions about disciplinary cases, no matter how interesting they may be.

4. What is open to the public? Many Board committees have at least some open session agenda items. Discussions about rules or policies are typically open to the public. So is the Board's committee on outreach. Other examples of agenda items that are typically public are the diversity workgroup and, new this year, the workgroup on clinician burnout. It will always be clearly indicated on the meeting agenda if agenda items are open or closed.

5. Can members of the public ask questions at Board Meetings? Yes they can. Members of the public are allowed to ask questions or offer comments, as long as they limit their remarks to items that are on the meeting agenda. I'll say a little more about how to participate in a Board Meeting a little later in this episode.

Now, let's hear more about how the virtual Board Meeting came together.

Interview with Todd Brosius: 4:41

JFB: Ah, well Todd, thank you so much for joining me. I really appreciate your time.

TB: Sure, thank you.

JFB: And now, as I recall, you were asked to chair the Virtual Work Group and asked to present a 100% virtual Board meeting in May with less than three weeks' notice. What were some of the first steps that you took to pull that off?

TB: So, the first thing we had to do was get accustomed to the software that we're using. In that case, in the case of the Virtual Work Group, we had experimented previously with some other software(s), and then what we settled on with the IT team was the MS Team software. Basically, for its security reasons. It provided us with some assurances that we have confidentiality. The Board deals with a lot of sensitive information in these interviews. The next step was figuring out who…who has any idea how to use MS Teams. And so, I…my first MS Teams meeting was the first time that we got together in the Virtual Work Group, so I was clearly not the expert. Actually, fortunately, we have the producer of our podcast here today, Sylvia French-Hodges, was an expert and had quickly gotten up to speed on how to use MS Team so we followed Sylvia's guide in those first couple days, in terms of how to go about setting up meetings. We ended up spending…there were eight of us on the work group at that time... we spent a lot of time kicking the tires on the software, making sure we had some mastery, but figuring out what it could do and what it couldn't do…what its limitations were. And then at that point, we needed to sit down and figure out, "OK, what's this meeting going to look like? And fortunately, the May meeting was a little streamlined, so there wasn't quite as much Board business to deal with there. But we wanted to figure out you know, really, people, the people that needed to be involved, the committees that were going to take place and documents that had to be involved and sort of try and target what we were doing to the strengths of MS Teams and try to structure things away from the limitations of MS Teams. And then sort of follow up to that, we had a really good group. I will say one of the things that was one of the best benefits for the work…Virtual Work Group, is we have a real diversity of people within the organization. There's someone from almost every department at the Board, so people had a lot of different visibility. They had different skill sets and so once we kind of figured out what we wanted to do or what we are,

how we were going to go about doing it, then we kind of really pretty easily fell into our roles within the Virtual Work Group. It's a very…everyone is very detail oriented and so then we started putting ourselves into places to manage that virtual Board meeting. And that was really, you know, it, I think. We started like two weeks before the Board meeting and it was, it was, you know, I'm still sort of surprised that we got it done, but it was just because everyone really went at it really hard.

JFB: So yeah, well, that's…that's great. And that's actually…I was going to ask you…so in your view, how did that first meeting go?

TB: Yeah, so it went much better than expected. So, I will say that you know…I had a pit in my stomach as we started the Board meeting. You know that Wednesday morning like is…this really all going to go off and then sure enough, it did. It wasn't…that's not to say that it was without hiccups. You know there are little things that happen here and there, but our goal all along was can we get the Board's business completed and that happened and…that so…so from that…that criteria it was, it was, definitely a success. And you know, it was…it was a new experience for everybody, so it was…we learned a lot from that Board meeting and so in addition to getting the Boards work done, we felt like we were better prepared to go into the next Board meeting after that.

JFB: Um, hmmm. And of course, you know the Board has now presented three virtual Board meetings. You had May, July and then September and you're getting ready to go into a fourth for November. Can you give some perspective on how things have changed overtime as you've refined things?

TB: Yeah, sure, so you know the first Board meeting is…is, you know, was I think anyone who is listening this podcast went through the same experience in one fashion or another. Getting used to, you know, muting yourself and unmuting yourself and so forth. And so, you know, over the course of the last three Board meetings, probably the biggest change has just been everybody's comfort with a virtual meeting in general, um and so organizationally, our Board members are more comfortable with it. The staff members are more comfortable with it. And frankly, are people who come in and make presentations to the Board from the outside are much more facile at doing this now. Um, so it's…it's…ah, that has been probably the biggest change. From our workgroup perspective, we've now started to develop a little bit of a system. Anytime you start get more repetitions at doing something, things start to fall into place a little bit better. So, I feel like now we have kind of the Board meetings are two months apart and we've got about a two-month system in place where we can plan out and get ready for the next Board meeting.

JFB: Hm, great. Now, I have participated in all of the virtual Board meetings as a staff member and I have to say from where I sit, I think your team has done a great job. I know though that it's not as simple as you all make it look, and I wondered if you could walk me through the process for planning a virtual Board meeting.

TB: Yeah, sure. So usually after a Board meeting is over, we all take about a week of decompression and then we get ready to come actually…we…we usually meet at the beginning just to figure out what went right and what went wrong in the previous Board meeting. If there's any areas we can improve upon, we sort of want to record those right after the Board meeting 'cause they can get lost after time. But then we sit down and we…we look at every Board meeting is a little bit different in terms of what needs to, what Board business needs to be to get completed. We have outside presentations from different groups, different organizations that come in, and the committee meetings themselves can be a little

different. So, we have to figure out, what you know is a committee meeting going to be an open session or closed session? Is there going to be any additional people who need to be invited to that meeting? So, we try to get what the components of the Board meeting are going to be, and then we start at that point, start putting together an agenda. And we have a pretty comprehensive spreadsheet that lists each committee, all the people who are involved and that gives us a structure for the Board meeting. So, once we've got that plan in place, the next portion is really, and I can't emphasize this part enough, is testing with anybody who is not part of your organization before bringing them in. If there was one thing I had to, I would sort of pound away at for anybody thinking about doing this down the road. Is, anyone outside of your organization, you should really try to test and make sure you get them in because you don't want to be doing that on the day of the Board meeting. You don't want, you know, 10 people in a committee meeting, waiting for one person to be able to get onto the platform. So, and we've accomplished that. You know, one of the parts of our Board meetings are interviews, investigative interviews and licensing interviews, and so each one of those interviews is somebody from outside the organization who has to come in and be able to interact with the Board members. And we got them down the first time. The second Board meeting in July, we actually had more…more interviews than we typically have in a regular Board meeting and to this…to this point, I'm knocking on wood as we speak, all of those interviews have been completed. We have not had an interview that went that went awry, and I think that the…the main reason for that is that we have tested in advance and made sure that people could get on and communicate with the Board.

JFB: Well, that's great to hear. So, you said something that triggered a question, which was that you know that first meeting you did in fact, do virtual interviews.

TB: We did, that's right.

JFB: Oh wow, OK, I…I did not realize that. Um, that's great. So…

TB: It was not as many but there were…there were a couple that were a couple of interviews that took place in that first one. But then there was we were that May meeting where things were a little bit stream…streamlined 'cause we were getting into this for the first time. The July meeting was almost a double. I mean we did more than we typically do in a Board meeting 'cause we were playing a little bit of catch up with the agendas from different some had been postponed.

JFB: Postponed…

TB: Exactly. That's right.

JFB: OK, well great. So, I wondered if you could sort of talk about what have been some of the most difficult challenges that you've had to overcome in doing these virtual meetings.

TB: Um, I would say, you know probably the biggest challenges is and it applies to me personally, but it applies organizationally as well and that is kind of backing up your planning for a Board meeting. Like allowing additional time and…and taking a time out and thinking about OK, who needs to be here? And are there any documents I need to have? Because, you know, in a traditional Board meeting, what we would be doing…some of this stuff can happen last minute. You can print something out on your, on your computer and walk down to the Boardroom and present it to the Board, you, know with you know 5-10 minutes notice. It is very difficult to do that virtually now. And it you know, if people are not invited who need to be there, that presents additional challenges. So, I'd say the biggest challenge is just for

everyone needs to back up their planning and they need to be thinking ahead towards the Board meeting at an earlier juncture. It's not that they have to think more about it, but they have to think about it in so that there can be some planning involved. You know the…the challenge that was there first, I think I mentioned, you know, with the muting of mics and unmuting. I heard a joke the other day with somebody said you know, can you sum up 2020 in five words and I think the comment was, "Dave, you're on mute" and so that that is…I think you know a…a symptom of what you know we're all dealing with virtual Board meetings, I think, so you know. But I will say, the first Board meeting I found myself sort of walking along like…like some sort of guard and if I heard any stray noises coming out of any particular line, I'd mute him immediately, and I don't have to do that anymore. Everyone just mutes themselves automatically now and for the most part people remember to unmute when they when they're coming back online, although we do still get the occasional, "Dave, you're on mute" right now.

JFB: Right, OK. Well, a little while ago you mentioned the importance of testing and I think that is great advice, but I wondered if you had any other tips or tricks that you would recommend for organizations or maybe even other regulatory Boards that hold public meetings virtually or that are looking at doing that.

TB: Yeah, I think I will say that I have found that the work…our work group format is…is particularly helpful and the way you know I didn't…I was not involved in, I was not the person who set up the workgroup, but actually to be honest with you, I'm not sure how it was that our work group got picked, in the personalities that got picked, but it was very fortuitous whatever it was. You know, having a group of people who are spread out throughout your organization allows for you to have some awareness and an interaction with the different parts of the organization in a different way that I think is easy to bring it back into a central fold and then try to structure that meeting. Um, the tip I would have for anybody, and I have to try to say this to myself as a mantra before the Board meetings, is kind of focused on what you can control. When you're having a virtual meeting, you have no control over that licensee's Wi-Fi on that particular day. Some things are going to…you're going to have some hiccups, and some things will go…won't go exactly as planned, but usually there's a work around. I mean, sometimes it's just a matter of instead of them being available through audiovisual, they can call in and be available through audio. But if you just, if you're patient, I think that generally that will…you can find a way to get the business of that particular meeting done. And then I guess the last thing I would just say is just sort of from an organizational standpoint is be nice to each other. Everyone is working hard to get…get it done. Everyone wants the Boards work to get done. Everybody who's there, if they're having Wi-Fi trouble, I guarantee you they are the people who are most concerned about that at the moment, and there probably having a moment of panic and I will say we've been blessed. I mean, without exception we've had…people have been patient as we've been working through this and I think it makes the tenor and the tone of the meeting much improved and it I think it actually aids in getting things done.

JFB: Yeah, I think those are words to live by. Be nice. Well Todd, thank you so much again for joining me. I really appreciate your time.

TB: Thank you very much. This was fun. Appreciate it

JFB: Cool. Thanks again.

Closing: 17:59

If you have stuck with us this long, I'll bet you are just dying to hear how you can listen in to a real live Board Meeting. And you are in luck. There's one coming up on Wednesday, November 18th.

And it's pretty simple. You will need to visit the Board's website at ncmedboard.org to see the meeting agenda. You can find it in the About the Board section of the website under Board Meetings. The agenda is usually posted at least a week before the meeting. And I happen to know it's there now.

In order to listen in to the live sessions, you will need information to access each individual committee that has open session agenda items. This information is not posted until a day or two before the meeting.

You'll see a link at the top of the agenda. Click on it to open a document with all the access information. If you are sitting at a computer when it's time for the session you are interested in, just click on the link in the document to go to the live session. If you have a question for the Board, you can use the chat feature to submit your comment. Again, only comments that address a topic that is on the agenda will be passed on to the Board. If you are on a phone, you can dial in with the telephone number provided to just listen in.

Well, that's all I have for you this time. Thank you for listening. If you have questions or comments about this episode, please email them to me at podcast@ncmedboard.org.