

Episode 54 – Knowledge is the best medicine

Most patients who have heard of the North Carolina Medical Board probably know it as the agency you complain to if you have a problem with your doctor. And while that is true, we are much, much more than that.

This is Jean Fisher Brinkley, Communications Director for the North Carolina Medical Board, and this is MedBoard Matters. On this brief episode we are exploring the information and resources the Board provides to the public.

Why does NCMB think these resources are important?

If you've listened to MedBoard Matters before, you might have heard me say that the North Carolina Medical Board exists to regulate medicine and surgery for the benefit and protection of the people of North Carolina.

There are two main ways NCMB does this. First, the Board ensures that only qualified medical professionals are licensed. Second the Board holds physicians and PA accountable if it has evidence they provided substandard care or engaged in unprofessional conduct.

Today's episode touches on a third way we support the public protection mandate, which is by creating tools patients can use to advocate for themselves. An informed patient is a safer patient.

There is way too much on NCMB's website for me to talk about every resource available, so instead I'm going to share the top five reasons patients should be using our information to help them navigate the medical sphere.

#1 – Our website is loaded with practical information you can put right to work for you. Most of the online resources I'm about to mention are part of something we call the Smart Patient Toolkit. We were inspired by questions NCMB frequently gets from patients and, to be frank, by questions we think they should be asking. What's the best way to prepare for a medical appointment to get maximum benefit from the visit? What's the right way to request copies of your medical records? And, what do federal medical privacy laws allow if you want to change something in your records? How can I find reliable, factual medical information? You can find the answers to all of these questions and more in the toolkit.

Another toolkit topic that frequently results in complaints to the Board is the clinician's right to release or dismiss a patient from care. Many patients are surprised and upset to learn that, yes, this is allowed. There is, however, a right way for a physician or PA to dismiss a patient. Our guide describes this process and outlines the steps the licensee should take to promote patient welfare and ensure continuity of care.

The Smart Patient Toolkit also includes some foundational education pieces intended to help patients hone their ability to make informed decisions about their health. Our piece on the importance of health literacy and how to develop it would be a great way to start your journey to becoming a more informed patient.

Another must read explains the concept of Informed Consent. Anyone who has interacted with mainstream medicine at all has likely given informed consent dozens and dozens of times by accepting pamphlets or documents before they agree to undergo a treatment or procedure or even when they accept a prescription. But let's face it, very few people actually read the fine print, let alone understand it. Our Informed Consent resource explains what it means to truly give informed consent and recommends specific steps patients should take to make sure they have given it. A patient should be aware of both the potential benefits AND risks of treatment, know the alternatives to the recommended treatment and understand the consequences of declining to have any treatment at all.

#2 – We provide information in audio and visual formats, as well as written. Not everyone learns by reading and we understand that.

This podcast, for example, is one of our favorite ways to convey complex regulatory or medical information because we think talking about these things, often with examples or analogies to clarify or illuminate, makes the information easier to understand. If you want to know more about the North Carolina Medical Board's work, it's worth taking a look at our library of past episodes.

As for visual media, it may interest you to know that we typically make short video versions of written articles or brochures to make the information available in a shorter, easier to digest format. For example, many of the resources I mentioned when talking about our online Smart Patient Toolkit have been turned into videos.

We also take steps to ensure our resources are accessible. We routinely translate brochures into Spanish and caption our videos in both English and Spanish.

#3 – NCMB maintains the state's most comprehensive database of information on licensed North Carolina physicians and physician assistants. Visitors to our website can look medical professionals up by name, county or specialty and there are so many reasons you might want to do this. Maybe you are looking for a new primary care provider or you have been referred to a specialist and want to check them out before you see them. Is their license active? Are they practicing in the specialty they trained in or are they doing something else?

You can also check to see if the licensee has a history of regulatory actions or any other adverse history. If the North Carolina Medical Board has taken action against the physician or PA you are looking up, you can click on the action and read the details. According to our records, about 3 percent of licensed physicians and PAs have received a public regulatory action from the North Carolina Medical Board. Other categories of adverse public information you might find include regulatory actions taken by other states, criminal convictions, malpractice payments and loss of hospital privileges.

One thing you will not find in NCMB's clinician profile pages are rankings or ratings of any kind. I'm sure many people would love to be able to sort the most skilled medical professionals from the negligent or deficient ones but that is not possible. North Carolina law allows NCMB to publish one of the most robust and transparent licensee information pages in the nation, but at the end of the day, it's just information. The presence or absence of adverse information does not predict whether you will have a good experience with a medical professional. Knowing about adverse information simply allows a patient to decide whether to entrust their health to a licensee with their eyes open. I personally think

it's wise to check the profile of any physician or PA before you see them for the first time, and perhaps once a year for your established clinicians, just to see if anything has changed.

If I have piqued your interest in using our Look up a doctor or PA tool, I recommend you listen to our podcast episode on this topic for tips on how to thoroughly check a licensee's credentials. It's an oldie but a goodie that we published way back in July of 2021.

#4 – We can help you understand your rights during a physical examination and learn to recognize when a medical professional may be using their position as a clinician to sexually exploit patients. Sexual misconduct represents one of the worst possible violations of the clinician-patient relationship. To help patients protect themselves, NCMB developed a multi-part series of brochures, each of which has been converted into a short video. One piece focuses on the types of touch patients may encounter during a medical examination and explains how each method is used to gather clinical information. A companion brochure discusses inappropriate behaviors, from sexual comments or jokes to outright sexual assault, that should never be part of a medical encounter. The third and final part of this series covers patient rights during a physical examination, including the right to undress and dress in private and the right to have a chaperone present.

The sexual misconduct series is part of NCMB's brochures collection. We also have brochures on the medical board's complaint process, and on the topics of health literacy and informed consent.

#5 – We are, in fact, the right agency to help you if you have concerns about a physician or PA. It is important to understand that the North Carolina Medical Board has the authority to take action only if there is evidence that the licensee has violated the state's Medical Practice Act. For example, if the medical care provided to a patient is found to be below accepted and prevailing standards of care in North Carolina, that is a violation. Various licensee behaviors, including sexual or financial exploitation of patients, can be violations as well.

NCMB doesn't expect patients to be able to tell if their concern involves a violation – it's the Board's job to determine that. The only way to know for sure is to report the matter to NCMB so it can be investigated. Complaints are submitted through NCMB's website and there is a tool to help visitors determine if the matter they want to report is outside of the Board's jurisdiction. We want to make sure we are the right agency to receive the information.

There you have it: My top five reasons you should be using the North Carolina Medical Board's Consumer Resources.

Before I sign off, I want to make sure you know how to find the resources I've talked about in this episode.

First, you'll need to visit www.ncmedboard.org.

Once you are on the home page, you'll select Resources & Information. If you are on a desktop or laptop computer, you'll find this section in the navigation menu that runs across the top of the page. If you are on a smartphone, click on the three short horizontal lines in the top left corner of your screen.

Click on Resources and Information and then select Consumer Resources. All of the resources we create for patients can be found in this section.

I hope I have persuaded at least a few of you of the potential value of these tools and resources. And, more important, I hope that you will use them to help take charge of your medical care.

Thanks so much for listening. I hope you will join me again.