

KNOW THY COUNCIL

Innovative Strategies for Healthcare Oversight in Trinidad and Tobago

By Kelly-Ann Phillips

In the face of what many may consider too many allegations of healthcare malpractice, medical negligence and quackery in Trinidad and Tobago, it may be useful to take note of the mechanisms in place for healthcare oversight and monitoring in our country. One such mechanism, and the focus of this article, is the appointment of Councils by Government to regulate healthcare practices through the registration and monitoring of healthcare practitioners.

In Trinidad and Tobago, these Councils include:

- The Dental Council of Trinidad & Tobago
- The Medical Council of Trinidad & Tobago
- The Nursing Council of Trinidad & Tobago
- The Pharmacy Council of Trinidad & Tobago
- The Trinidad & Tobago Opticians Registration Council
- The Council for Professions Related to Medicine of Trinidad & Tobago (having oversight of boards of Radiographers, Medical Lab Technicians, Physiotherapists, Medical & Psychiatric Social Workers, Nutritionists & Dieticians and Occupational & Speech & Language Therapists)

Collectively, these Councils are responsible for the oversight and monitoring of thousands of locally registered healthcare providers (in the case of the Nursing Council, upwards of 20,000), and these registrants have diverse geographic locales both in Trinidad and Tobago and abroad. This vast responsibility, where service as a Council member is an engagement alongside the individual's main economic activity, may predispose Councils to innovations which promote efficiency in the administration of their critical function. Thus, the following are some strategies which could enhance the function of these overseeing bodies, reduce administrative barriers and foster convenience as a facilitator of practitioner compliance.

OPTIMISE THE INITIAL REGISTRATION PROCESS

By law, healthcare practitioners must be enrolled in a national overseeing Council in order to operate legitimately in Trinidad and Tobago. However, the costs for professionals seeking registration can be very high. Commonplace are occurrences of applicants bringing in incorrect documents and having to return. A further complication is presented when applicants are resident abroad and documents such as university certificates, birth certificates or forms of personal identification have to be submitted to the Council as a necessary part of the application process.

As a partial remedy, several Councils have sought to publish all registration requirements online via their websites, so that applicants can be certain of the registration requirements prior to making an application. Notwithstanding, there is room for innovations to further optimise the process.

A useful amendment to the current registration workflow may be to enable the submission of applications and supporting documents via an online medium—such as a secure registration portal—for preliminary review by the Council. Beyond enabling individual Council members to preview application documents, the registration portal could facilitate an online collaborative assessment of the application with other Council members. If incomplete, incorrect or otherwise invalid documentation is submitted, the Council can advise the applicant virtually and continue the exchange online toward fulfilment of the application requirement. Although this online workflow will not (in the case of Trinidad and Tobago) negate the need for original hard copy documents to be eventually submitted, it could certainly improve the friendliness and efficiency of the process, and thereby decrease the temptation for a practitioner to operate without a licence.

Government appoints healthcare practitioner councils to deal with allegations of malpractice, medical negligence and quackery.

ENABLE ONLINE PAYMENTS

Once an applicant's registration has been approved, the payment of fees is mandatory in order to initiate and maintain registration. Further, fees are also payable for temporary registration, the supply of duplicate certificates and other specified services. Unfortunately, the manual process currently in place for making these payments has been cited as burdensome by many registrants. As a result, payment deadlines slip as does the practitioner's registration status, impacting his/her legal standing and ability to operate legitimately.

Accordingly, innovations for Council administration must consider facilities for receiving payment information online. Once payment has been made, proof of registration (e.g. an official receipt and/or certificate of registration) can be sent electronically to new or renewing registrants. This negates the requirement for a practitioner to visit the Council office to pay fees or to obtain evidence of his/her registration.

ENLIST PRACTITIONER ASSISTANCE

In the travel industry, airlines have allowed passengers to book their own tickets, make flight arrangements, even check in and receive boarding passes on-line. This has significantly improved the administration of travel arrangements and the airline's customer

service. Similarly, it may prove strategic for healthcare oversight bodies to provide online registrant records (or profiles) so that the registrant has secure access to update his/her own data.

To illustrate, some Councils in Trinidad & Tobago stipulate a minimum requirement of Continuous Professional Development (CPD) undertakings to maintain registration. CPD refers to the maintenance of the currency of one's skills and practices with advancements in one's chosen profession. In this context, a healthcare professional may see value in being able to update his own online registrant record with any academic or training programmes completed. He may also find value in being able to provide real time updates to his registration record of any operational changes, such as business location, telephone number or email address.

ENLIST CITIZEN ASSISTANCE

An innovative way to motivate practitioners to maintain their registration and the legitimacy of their practice is by enlisting the assistance of the general public. Councils can empower citizens to make informed decisions about their healthcare professional by making public the provider's legitimacy, and encouraging

customers to avoid providers who are not "in good standing" in the judgement of their overseeing professional authority.

Although the practice of publishing annual listings in the "Gazette" is already in place, its effectiveness for citizen empowerment could be improved by making such listings:

- More easily accessible, by publishing online and interactive listings
- More current, by allowing real-time updates to online lists in line with changes in a registrant's status

Citizens could also be provided with an online facility to easily report any experience of professional malpractice or insufficiency from their healthcare provider, so that the matter can be investigated and appropriate action taken by the relevant authority.

The essence of the innovative strategies presented is a general movement toward minimising the administrative barriers to practitioner compliance so as to also minimise the tendency to practise outside of the law. This movement is expected to foster an "all-hands-on deck" approach, engaging civilians, registrants and overseeing bodies in a move toward a safer health sector in Trinidad and Tobago.

Innovative strategies include a general movement toward minimising the administrative barriers to practitioner compliance so as to also minimise the tendency to practice outside of the law. It fosters an "all-hands-on deck" approach, engaging civilians, registrants and overseeing bodies.

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