

Guidance: Unethical online behaviour

A recurring theme in calls to the Ethics Officer by hearing service practitioners (audiologists and audiometrists) and complaints to the Hearing Professional Conduct and Complaints Body (HPCCB) is concerns regarding the conduct of other hearing service practitioners online.

A common issue we hear is that audiologists make statements on public or closed-group online webpages stating that audiometrists are not qualified, or as qualified as audiologists, to provide hearing services to adults.

Other online behaviours raised as concerning are when hearing service practitioners publish statements suggesting that other clinics and/or practitioners provide sub-standard, or even unethical, hearing services.

The broader reputational damage to the profession is real.

Clients who have not seen an audiologist or audiometrist before call the Ethics Officer to discuss their fears that:

- "all hearing service practitioners are unethical cowboys",
- "anyone can call themselves an audiologist or audiometrist – even if they have no qualifications!",
- "there is no regulation of the profession", and therefore
- anyone can therefore provide hearing services, including under the Hearing Services Program with no qualification requirements or repercussions for unethical conduct.

But these fears are not based on the clients' own experience, or even that of other clients. **Often clients' fears regarding whether or not audiologists and audiometrists are ethical health service practitioners are based on statements published by audiologists and audiometrists themselves.**

It is a breach of the Code of Conduct to disparage hearing service practitioners and the professions more broadly

Standard 7 of the Code of Conduct for audiologists and audiometrists states that 'Members must behave professionally and ethically when interacting in a professional capacity'. This includes the specific requirements:

- 7.1 Members must behave professionally and ethically when interacting in a professional capacity and when making public statements, for example posts on social media. This includes, but is not limited to:*
- a. Not bullying, defaming, disparaging or harassing clients, employees, colleagues, professional body employees or other healthcare workers.*
 - b. Not making comments or behaving in a manner that is likely to detrimentally affect the reputation of the profession, the professional body(ies), other members or other health care workers. This requirement does not preclude members from making complaints or providing feedback on other individuals' and bodies' conduct via appropriate channels (e.g. via direct and private communications with the professional bodies, to other health complaints entities, in response to government inquiries, or to the Hearing Professional Conduct and Complaints Body).*
- 7.5 Members shall not engage in dishonesty, misrepresentation or any form of conduct that adversely reflects on their profession or other members' suitability to provide hearing services.*

You are able to make an anonymous complaint regarding concerns about online conduct

Often, hearing service practitioners who have concerns about the conduct of other practitioners online describe that they do not want to further inflame the situation and/or damage their relationship with the other practitioner by making a complaint.

Complaints about conduct that is publicly available or to a wide group of people, for example statements made online in public or group chats, can be made to the Ethics Officer and HPCCB anonymously.

In most cases, the Ethics Officer and HPCCB are unable to accept anonymous complaints since they are about an interaction between two people (e.g. between a client and member, or between two professionals). This is because the respondent (i.e. the person the complaint is about) needs to know the details of the complaint in order to be able to respond.

However, in the case of statements made online we can often accept anonymous complaints, as long as the online conduct has been documented and the member's name is clearly visible (e.g. via a screenshot).

If you are unsure about if online conduct is unethical, or whether you want to make a complaint, you are also able to call the Ethics Officer anonymously.