



THE HEALTH PROFESSIONS COUNCIL OF SOUTH AFRICA(HPCSA) RESPONSE TO COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The COVID-19 Pandemic calls upon health practitioners to operate under situations and demands that the current regulatory framework has not anticipated. During this pandemic, redeployment of practitioners to support our healthcare system to deal with the pandemic will call on practitioners to practice outside their usual scope of professions. Practitioners are already caring for sick and anxious patients while others are already being infected by the virus, while others are caring for their affected families and loved ones.

The HPCSA understands that the declaration of the state of national disaster in terms of the Disaster Management Act is a national emergency, which requires practitioners registered under the Health Professions Act 1974 (the Act) and other health statutory councils to meet challenges which our regulatory framework must accommodate.

In supporting our government's efforts in managing this pandemic and all practitioners providing front-line care to sick and vulnerable patients, the HPCSA provides the following guidelines and application of the existing Regulations, Rules and Guidelines under the Act that will allow more practitioners into our health system and increase flexibility to practitioners' responses to the pandemic. Further changes will be made when needed as we continue to closely monitor the developments in regard to the pandemic.

1. Performance of Professional Acts (Ethical Rule 21)

The HPCSA considers the current state of disaster as an emergency for the application of this ethical rule. Whenever practitioners are called on to perform professional acts which are outside the scope of their professions, consideration should be made by individual practitioners as to their ability to perform such professional acts with reasonable skills and safety based on their education, training and experience.

2. Conditions of practicing as a specialist

Medical practitioners and dentists who hold registration as specialists in terms of the Act are allowed not to confine their practice to the specialty/subspecialty or related specialties in which they are registered and the fees charged for professional acts ordinarily performed by general practitioners shall not be higher than those charged by general practitioners for the same examinations or procedures.

3. Continuing Professional Development (CPD)

Practitioners are encouraged to continue to participate in CPD activities that are relevant to the scope of their professions and the current COVID-19 pandemic. However, the HPCSA understands that

practitioners may have difficulty meeting CPD requirements during this year due to cancellation of conferences, CPD activities and changed priorities to meet the necessary demands of our health system. The HPCSA will not act against practitioners who have been audited for CPD if they failed to submit their CPD portfolio and/or to meet the requirements and consideration will be made of the current situation in future audits.

4. Undergraduate Training

With the closure of institutions of higher learning, the HPCSA recognizes that health professionals' educational programmes will be negatively affected. Council expects the faculties of Health Sciences to put measures in place to compensate for the lost time in consultation with the relevant professional boards.

5. Requirements for Internship training and Postgraduate Training

Institutions accredited for internship and postgraduate training are encouraged to ensure that they provide the trainees with reasonable training and clinical exposure, as well as support during this difficult and challenging time that is likely to affect their training.

Further details in relation to internship and postgraduate training will be provided by the relevant professional boards.

6. Colleges of Medicine of South Africa Examinations

The HPCSA has noted the decision of the CMSA Senate to postpone the first semester examination to the second half of the year and the possibility of the examinations not being conducted during the course of this year, depending on the developments in regard to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Registrars and Senior Registrars are employed on a contractual basis and the postponement of the examination will not only affect the production of specialists for the country, but their employment as Registrar's and/or Registrars. The HPCSA believes that the Provincial Departments of Health will make financial resources available to keep the Registrars/Senior Registrars in employment in order to cover for the lost time as a result of the pandemic.

7. Registrations

Council considers all activities related to registration as essential services and practitioners should continue to submit their applications for registration and/or restoration, electronically to: registrationgroup@hpcsa.co.za.

Registrations processed during the lockdown period will be for a limited or temporary period from the date of registration to 31 March 2021 and applicants will be required to provide original documents after the lockdown and once verified, the registrations will then be converted to permanent registration.

Applications from persons who hold qualifications not prescribed for registration, those applications that requires the applicant to undergo an assessment as prescribed by the relevant professional board will only be attended to after the lockdown period.

All applications will be processed within 10 days.

8. Annual Renewal of Registrations

The due date on which payment for annual renewals of Registrations was due has been extended from 01 April 2020 to 01 June 2020 and practitioners should ensure that their annual fees are paid by the 31st May 2020. Practitioners should utilize the online portal for the renewal of their registration where they will also access their annual practicing certificate.

All annual practicing certificates which expired on 31 March 2020 should be considered as valid until 31 May 2020.

Practitioners may also access their portfolio using the HPCSA mobile app that is available on this link: <https://hpcsamobileapp.co.za/>

9. Practitioners wellbeing

Practitioners are in the front-line in dealing with the COVID-19 Pandemic. The HPCSA is encouraged to refer to the NICD guidelines for COVID-19 and seek from supportive structures available during this period, assistance when the need arises. Practitioners are advised to use the services of the South African Depression and Anxiety Group that is available on 0800 456 789 (24- hour helpline) and other services readily available to them.

10. Restoration of practitioners to the Clinical Register

Practitioners who have been on the non-clinical register and/or applied for voluntary erasure in the period not exceeding five (5) years, will be considered for restoration to the clinical register without a need to meet further requirements. This measure is put in place to ensure that our health care system has enough resources to respond to the pandemic.

11. Personal Protective Equipment

The HPCSA expects employers of health practitioners to take all necessary steps to ensure that practitioners are always suitably equipped and afforded personal protective equipment to minimize the risk of infection on practitioners.

12. Telemedicine/Telehealth

On 26 March 2020, the HPCSA published the Guidance on the Application of Telemedicine Guidelines During the Covid-19 Pandemic. The following provisions in these guidelines were hereby amended-

1. Clause (b) which stated that:

“Telehealth is only permissible in circumstances where there is an already established practitioner-patient relationship, except where Telepsychology and/or Telepsychology is involved, in which case telehealth is permissible even without an established practitioner-patient relationship”.

It is hereby amended as follows:

Telehealth should preferably be practiced in circumstances where there is an already established practitioner-patient relationship, and where such a relationship does not exist, practitioners may still consult using Telehealth provided such consultations are done in the best interest of patients.

2. Clause (c) which stated that:

“Practitioners may charge a fee for services rendered through a telehealth platform.”

It is hereby amended as follows:

Although practitioners may charge fees for consultations undertaken through Telehealth platforms, the Council strongly cautions against practices that may amount to over-servicing and perverse incentives.

Practitioners are reminded that the Ethical Rules of Conduct for Health Practitioners Registered under the Health Professions Act are still applicable during the practice of Telehealth; that these guidelines are only applicable during the COVID-19 pandemic and that the HPCSA shall, soon after the end of the pandemic, inform practitioners at to when the guidelines will cease to apply.

13. Complaints

The HPCSA will continue to process all complaints received from members of the public and/or patients against practitioners registered under the Act but will consider the extraordinary circumstances in which practitioners are working and the heavy demands on them during this period.

All professional conduct inquiries and contact mediations have been suspended during the period of nation-wide lockdown.

14. Meetings of Council and Professional Boards

Although members of the Council and Professional Boards are at the front-line in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic, the governance structures will continue to meet on the virtual platforms even during the lockdown period.

Conclusion

The HPCSA believes that all practitioners registered with the Professional Boards under its ambit are committed to their patients and society and will use their knowledge and professional skills in assisting our government to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic.

We will continue to monitor the developments regarding the COVID-19 pandemic scan and provide guidance to practitioners during this pandemic

REFERENCES

1. National Institute of Communicable Disease. Covid- 19 Guidelines. Available on <https://www.nicd.ac.z/diseases-a-z-index/covid-19/covid-19-guidelines/> Accessed on 22/03/2020

2. National Department of Health. Corona Virus (Covid-19) – Updated. Available on <https://www.health.gov.za/> Accessed on 22/03/2020
3. Medical Council of New Zealand. Current Standards. Available on <https://www.mcnz.org.nz/our-standards/> Accessed on 22/03/2020
4. General Medical Council. Ethical Guidelines. Available on <https://www.gmcuk.org/ethical-guidance/ethical-hub> Accessed on 22/03/2020
5. Australian Health Practitioners Regulatory Agency. Medical Board of Australia responses to COVID-19 pandemic. Available on <https://www.medicalboard.gov.au/News/2020-03-30-COVID19-Board-response.aspx/> Accessed on 01 April 2020