

SMC

Newsletter



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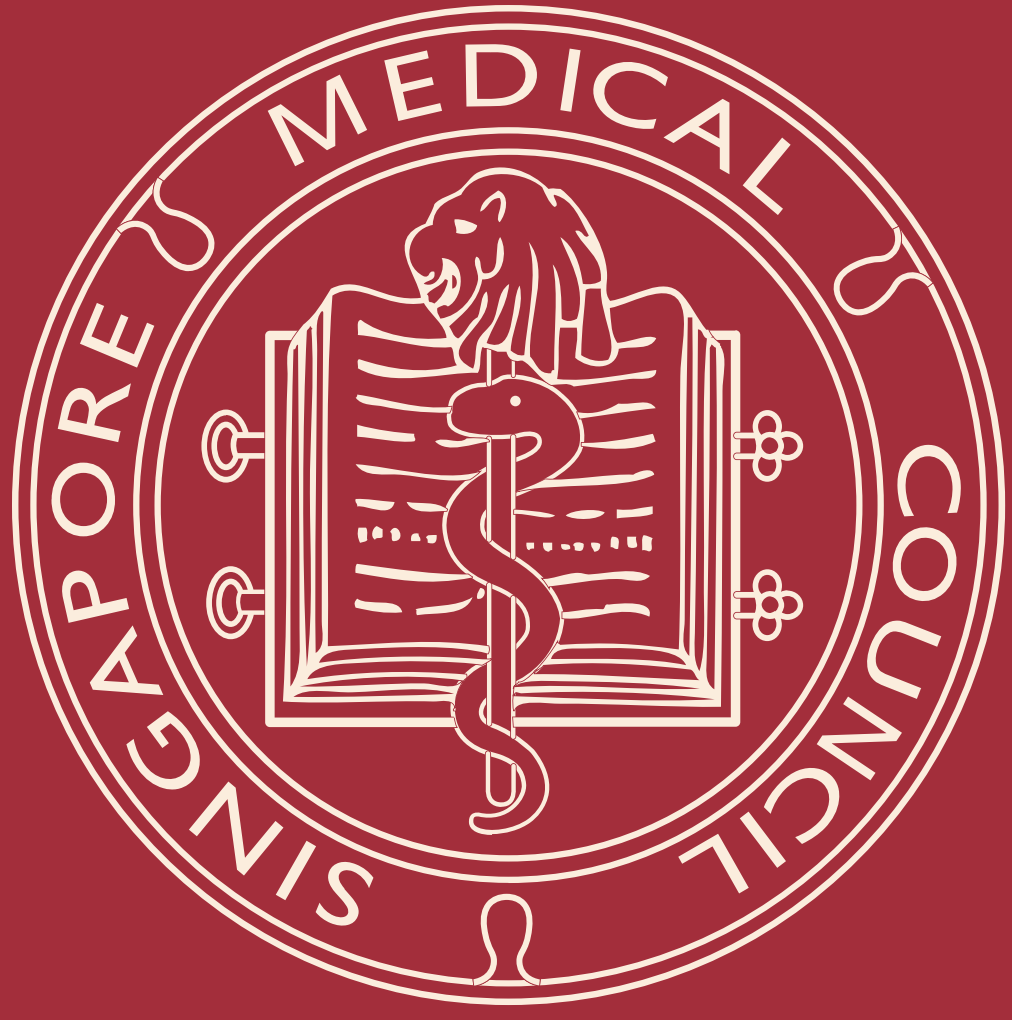
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FROM THE DESK OF
PROF. CHEE YAM CHENG

SMC President's Message

Dear Colleagues,

SPS' Address at the Pledge Ceremony

In February this year, we witnessed a total of 217 doctors taking the Physician's Pledge at the SMC Physician's Pledge Affirmation Ceremony. We thank Mdm Rahayu Mahzam, Senior Parliamentary Secretary for Health, our Guest of Honour for attending and delivering her address to the doctors.

Her address notes that patient-centred care includes focusing on patients, respecting their preferences, needs and values and getting them more involved when making clinical decisions.

Doctors were reminded to play a crucial role in preventive care by promoting healthy lifestyles and encouraging patients to enrol with a Healthier SG clinic. She also highlighted the importance of actively cultivating a cooperative and supportive environment with all healthcare professionals to deliver effective and appropriate care.

Series in Professional Ethics —

A Reminder on ECEG on the Issuance of Medical Certificates

SMC has received enquiries from members of public concerning the issuance of medical certificates. There were also a few cases in which doctors were disciplined by the Disciplinary tribunals for grossly inappropriate medical leave or light duty.

As part of the Professional series on Ethics, the Council have thought it important to remind all registered medical practitioners to adhere to the 2016 Ethical Code and Ethical Guidelines (ECEG) on the issuance of Medical Certificates.

We have extracted Section B4 of the ECEG as well as the Handbook on Medical Ethics (HME) for your reference.

Professor Chee Yam Cheng
President



24 February 2024

SMC Physician's Pledge Affirmation Ceremony

The SMC held its first Physician's Pledge Affirmation Ceremony this year on 24 February. The event, which was held at the College of Medicine Building, Ministry of Health, saw 217 provisionally- and conditionally-registered doctors taking the Pledge. During the Pledge Ceremony, doctors were reminded of their responsibilities to their patients as well as the importance of upholding high professional and ethical standards.

Senior Parliamentary Secretary (Health) Mdm Rahayu Mahzam was the Guest-of-Honour for the event. Invited guests included representatives of the medical professional bodies and Medical Boards of hospitals.



Speech by Senior Parliamentary Secretary (Health) Mdm Rahayu Mahzam

I am pleased to join you at the Singapore Medical Council (SMC) Physician's Pledge Affirmation Ceremony this afternoon. The Physician Pledge represents a significant milestone in your professional journey. The oath that you will be taking reaffirms the values at the heart of the medical profession – dedication, integrity, and respect. It also underscores your unwavering dedication to provide patient-centred care within our evolving healthcare landscape.

You join the ranks of Singapore's medical fraternity at an important juncture, as we just launched Healthier SG last year. Healthier SG aims to enhance the nation's health and well-being by placing a stronger emphasis on preventive care.

Healthier SG therefore seeks to reduce the burden of chronic diseases and ensure a higher quality of life for all Singaporeans. It underscores our commitment to building a resilient and sustainable healthcare system.

But how does Healthier SG impact on your role as physicians administering patient-centred care? Patient-centred care focuses on the patients, respecting their preferences, needs and values and getting them more involved when making clinical decisions. It goes beyond treating them when they are unwell. Under Healthier SG, all of you have a role to play. Doctors can play a crucial role in preventive care by promoting healthy lifestyles and timely screening or vaccinations or simply encouraging your patients to enrol with a Healthier SG clinic. Besides physical well-being, it is also important to consider the emotional and social needs of your patients. Therefore, we must consider initiatives and programmes that support mental well-being and encourage activities that bring about social interaction. Your unwavering commitment to these principles will play a crucial role in the success of Healthier SG, as we work together towards improving the health and wellbeing of Singaporeans.

I want to make the point that you are not alone in the path you have chosen to practise medicine in Singapore. The Ministry of Health (MOH) and SMC are committed to support you in your professional journey, where we have developed career pathways to support your professional aspirations. Be open to explore these career options. You can be a Healthier SG Champion by becoming a Family Physician in the primary care sector, or a specialist in public hospitals. If you enjoy the challenges of broad-based clinical care in a hospital setting, you can also consider training to become a Hospital Clinician.

MOHH and the various public healthcare institutions are committed to provide you with the necessary information on career options to support you in making well-informed career choices.



The oath [...] reaffirms the values at the heart of the medical profession – dedication, integrity, and respect.

As professionals, you commit to consistently enhance your knowledge and skills. This involves ongoing education to stay abreast of the latest advancements in medicine and healthcare. The Singapore Medical Association (SMA), College of Family Physicians Singapore (CFPS) and the Academy of Medicine, Singapore (AMS) are important providers of continuing medical education. These organisations also provide a platform and valuable opportunities for you to interact with and glean valuable insights from your peers and seasoned medical professionals.

However, the practice of medicine goes beyond acquiring knowledge, competencies, and skills. At the heart of it, doctors must uphold integrity and practice in an ethical and responsible manner. There are recent initiatives from SMC aimed at promoting ethical behavior, awareness, and professionalism within the medical profession. One such example is the introduction of the mandatory Medical Ethics core points requirement as mentioned by Professor Chee Yam Cheng earlier in his speech.

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No man is an island. The delivery of high-quality healthcare services requires collaborative teamwork with colleagues from other healthcare professions.

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Doctors intending to renew their practicing certificate from 2026 must ensure they start accumulating Continuing Medical Education (CME) core points in Medical Ethics from this year. This aims to help doctors understand and become more familiar with the SMC Ethical Code and the Ethical Guidelines.

To better support you in providing appropriate clinical care for your patients, I encourage you to take reference from the ACE Clinical Guidances (ACGs) developed by MOH's Agency for Care Effectiveness. These ACGs provide concise evidence-based recommendations to inform clinical practice and support shared decision-making. ACGs cover a range of common clinical conditions encountered in both chronic and acute care that are tailored to the Singapore context by addressing local care needs, using local studies or data where available, and taking into account local policies, care pathways, and availability of treatments. Additionally, you can also accrue CME points for reading the ACGs.

No man is an island. The delivery of high-quality healthcare services requires collaborative teamwork with colleagues from other healthcare professions. In our daily responsibilities, it is crucial to actively cultivate a cooperative and supportive environment with all healthcare professionals. This begins by recognising, respecting, and appreciating the contributions of not only fellow doctors but also the entire team of nurses, allied health professionals, pharmacists, and other ancillary

workers. By leveraging on the collective expertise and perspectives of each member, we can then deliver effective and appropriate care for our nation's health.

Lastly, doctoring is a demanding career. Amidst your busy schedule, do take time to prioritise yourselves. Pay attention to your physical, mental, and social health. Maintain your personal resilience and it will translate into better care for the patients that you see.

In closing, congratulations to all of you in reaching this milestone and I wish you a successful and fulfilling career ahead.

Thank you.





Speech by Professor Chee Yam Cheng

President of SMC

Today is the last day of the lunar New Year celebrations, a very good afternoon and happy Chap Goh Meh. On behalf of the Singapore Medical Council, I warmly welcome and thank our Guest-of-Honour, Mdm Rahayu Mahzam, our Senior Parliamentary Secretary for Health, our distinguished guests and the more than 200 colleagues taking the Physician's Pledge today for your presence.

The Physician's Pledge

Standing here today brings back the memory of medical school days for those of us who are old enough to have studied in this building before. Where I stand and where you are sitting was the medical library where many days and hours were spent by many doctors in Singapore reading, studying and resting. But at the heart of academic and professional pursuits is conducting oneself with integrity and with high standards of professionalism beginning as medical students and going on as doctors. This is considered so integral and important that the Pledge you recite today is written into the Second Schedule of the Medical Registration Regulations or MRR in short. Section 16 of the MRR requires all doctors who wish to be fully registered with the SMC to take the Physician's Pledge.

In a famous case of a failed appeal by a well-known doctor to the High Court, the High Court in Singapore observed that the Physician's Pledge is not just mere rhetoric; it shows that the spirit of public service and the existence of ethical obligations underpin the practice of medicine. As society collectively entrusts doctors with its members' health, wellbeing and lives, patients and societies at large expect doctors to be responsible, and to maintain the highest standards of professional practice and conduct.

Integrity, ethics and professionalism are indeed the foundation and pillars of our profession.

The Ethical Code and Ethical Guidelines

Integrity, ethics and professionalism are indeed the foundation and pillars of our profession. The Ethical Code and Ethical Guidelines or ECEG was published by the Medical Council for all doctors to



internalise into our conduct and practice. It is not onerous to read in one sitting and it is eminently advisable to familiarise oneself with the ECEG. After you have done so, you would still have to refer to it from time to time and to consult it when you face ethical and professional decisions in your practice. For more guidance in any particular area, you should also refer to the accompanying Handbook on Medical Ethics for the detailed explanations on a particular code or guideline.

Compulsory CME on Mandatory Medical Ethics for all doctors

To ensure that doctors are familiar with and are up to date on ethical issues and best practices, the Continuing Medical Education (CME) on Medical Ethics was made mandatory for doctors starting from those who renewed their practising certificate this year. This was recommended by the MOH Workgroup which reviewed the taking of Informed Consent and SMC Disciplinary Process. Let me quote from Recommendation 10 of the Workgroup's Report. "Currently, there is a low take-up rate for medical education on medical ethics for the general population of doctors as such courses are not compulsory. Core points for CME are only awarded for clinical updates within the specialty. There is a need to increase

awareness of ethical issues and developments, such as informed consent, throughout the medical profession, as these developments can have a significant impact on the practice of medicine. Mandating that doctors update themselves on these issues will ensure that they are exposed to a baseline level of knowledge on the applicable legal standards in practice that will allow them to practice effectively.”

You would have just received a circular from SMC on 31 January to remind doctors concerning this Mandatory Medical Ethics or MME core points in our doctors’ CME. Registered doctors must obtain the minimum Mandatory Medical Ethics core points before they can renew their practising certificates (PCs) from 2026 onwards. Hence our doctors will have to start accumulating their MME points from this year onwards. The Council is grateful to have the partnership of the three medical professional bodies, namely, the Academy of Medicine Singapore, the College of Family Physicians Singapore and the Singapore Medical Association who have worked hard to develop a systematic Medical Ethics curriculum. The curriculum will cover four fundamental core topics: a) Professionalism; b) Ethics; c) Informed Consent and Medical Decision Making; and d) Medical Records, Privacy and Confidentiality.

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Series in Professional Ethics

The Council is also running a series on professional ethics in the regular SMC e-newsletters which are also available through the SMC website. You can read about important issues which SMC often deals with in the complaints and disciplinary processes. Such issues include propriety and sexual boundaries in a doctor's practice or personal conduct and the proper prescribing of hypnotics and benzodiazepines and codeine containing cough mixtures which are addictive drugs.

You would also have received regular emails from the SMC. Please pay attention to them. To be practical, if your emails are clogged up with too many emails from important and unimportant sources, you may want to have a different email address reserved for those from important sources and organisations like the SMC. This will give you the alerts that requires your attention for matters like renewing your practising certificates, important announcements like mandatory medical ethics, or reminders to take part in the compulsory election of the 'elected Council members'. SMC also sends a newsletter which it publishes every 4 months. The newsletter strives to be useful for all doctors and contains articles and announcements of interest. You may even find yourself in the next issue, in the photos taken today.



Conclusion

Colleagues, let us take a moment of introspection and reflection to think about our future. I quote some parts of the Pledge here. Will we dedicate our life to the service of humanity, practise our profession with conscience and dignity, make the health of our patients our first consideration and comply with the provisions of the Ethical Code? Will we constantly strive to add to our knowledge and skill? Or on the flip side, will some live only for their own benefit - selfishly, practising without conscience, without knowing the provisions of the ethical code, without the dignity of professionalism? Will behaviours be inappropriate and skills and knowledge deficient? We sincerely hope this will never be the case with you.

Our hope is that all of you here, will continue to be ethical, compassionate and professional. Let me extend my sincerest wishes for your success, and continued dedication of your lives to the service of humanity. Thank you and may you always benefit from a lifetime of good medical practice.

Issuance of Medical Certificates (MCs)

SMC would like to remind all registered medical practitioners to adhere to the 2016 ECEG section B4 when issuing MCs to patients. Doctors may also refer to the 2016 Handbook on Medical Ethics for further guidance.

2016 SMC ECEG

B4. Medical certificates

The community places trust in doctors and authorises you to certify illnesses or disability through medical certificates. Good practice in writing medical certificates means:

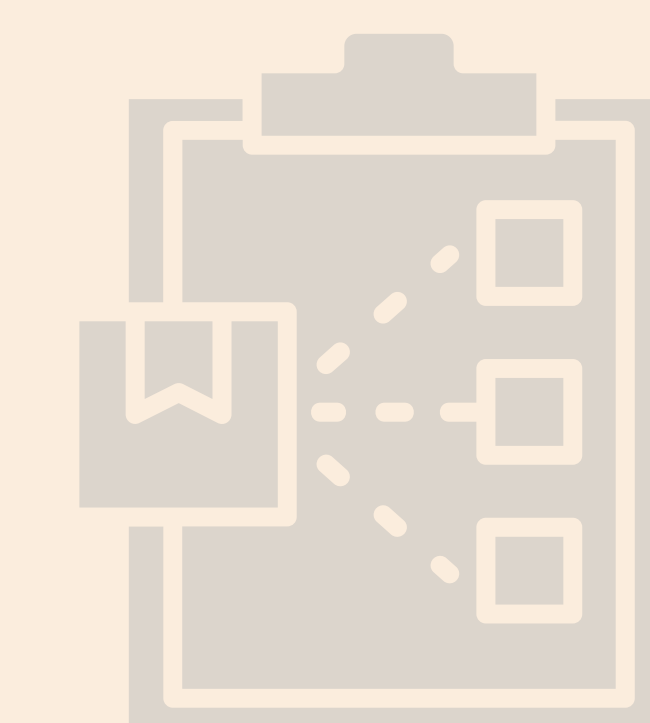
- 1 Medical certificates must be issued to patients only on proper medical grounds arrived at through good clinical assessment. You must not take into consideration extraneous factors such as who pays for the consultation, what benefits the patients may receive or what employers' preferences may be.



2 Where possible, medical certificates must be handed over only to patients themselves. When patients request or consent to it, you may send the medical certificates directly to employers.



3 Medical certificates must be written objectively, accurately and in good faith, must cover an appropriate duration and where relevant, must provide an accurate account of patients' limitations during the periods covered.



4 If you are certifying that the patients are fit to return to work but with limitations on their level of activity at work, you must first ensure that the patients' work conditions allow this and, to the best of your ability, ensure that appropriate light duties are in fact available to the patients at their place of work.



5 You must not post-date or back-date the date of issue of your medical certificates. The date of issue must be that of the day of consultation or treatment. The date you begin coverage may be before the date of issue only if it is clear to you that the patients' absence from work prior to the date of issue is consistent with their clinical presentation.



6 You must not amend the particulars on medical certificates issued by other doctors. If you disagree with the provisions of other doctors' medical certificates, you may issue new medical certificates. However, you must only do this after assessing the patients yourself to determine that this is justified on medical grounds and where appropriate and possible, consulting the other doctors before you do so.



7 Diagnoses must not be stated on the medical certificates unless patients have consented to this.



8 As medical certificates are documents that carry professional and legal implications, you must sign the certificates personally at the time of consultation and if another person has filled in the details on your behalf, you must satisfy yourself that the details are correct before signing.



9 When medical certificates are generated electronically and where you are in control of the systems, you must ensure that there are security protocols to prevent fraudulent issuance of the certificates. If you are not in control of the systems, you must use the systems responsibly and abide by the security protocols in place.





2016 SMC HME

B4. Medical certificates

- 1 The issuance of medical certificates is a clinical decision. Hence, you are responsible for ensuring that any medical certificates you issue to patients are justified on proper medical grounds and that you had arrived at your decision through good clinical assessment.**



Medical certificates are issued either to promote patients' recovery from medical conditions, or to protect third parties against possible harm from the patients' medical conditions. Unless there are clinical reasons for issuing medical certificates, well patients who consult you in your clinic should only be given certificates of attendance for their employers.

- 2 **The issuance or contents of a medical certificate ought not to be influenced by extraneous considerations such as the individual or organisation which initiated the request, who pays for the consultation, the benefits the patients may receive, employers' preferences or any other factors outside of medical considerations.**



It is inappropriate to issue medical certificates to patients of durations that are too short for the illnesses or injuries suffered. Sometimes doctors limit their medical certificates for workers according to requirements of the Ministry of Manpower for employers to report injuries, so that the employers do not have to report.

Considering employers' preferences in such situations is wrong. Even if you arrange for reviews at short intervals, you should consider that having patients come back frequently when not clinically necessary would not be in the best interests of the patients.

Another example of the wrong use of medical certification is to indicate a longer duration on a medical certificate than is necessary, or when they are not strictly necessary at all, simply because patients may wish to avoid National Service fitness tests or recalls.

3 **Medical certificates ought to be given directly to patients themselves.**



This is because your responsibility is to your patients and no other party. It is the patients' responsibility to hand the medical certificates to the appropriate persons at their places of work or study. Only if patients specifically request, or consent to it, should you send medical certificates to their employers.

The medical certificate which is issued should specify the expected period of illness being covered and, where necessary, whether the severity of the illness renders the person unfit to attend court.



- 4 **If you are certifying that the patients are fit to return to work but with limitations on their level of activity at work, to the best of your ability you need to be assured that the patients' work conditions allow this and that duties appropriate to their limitations are in fact available.**



If you are certifying a limitation of activity at work, the description of the limitations should be as detailed as possible (beyond merely the use of overly-broad short phrases such as “light duties”) so as to help the employers understand the constraints faced by your patients. You need to establish within your ability, that the limited work you recommend is actually available at the workplace for your recommendations to be meaningful. There being a wide range of “light duties”, it is possible that even if the employers are trying to be helpful, the lightest work available for the patients is beyond their limited capabilities while they are ill or injured. This could be harmful to them. A typical example is a construction site worker for whom the lightest duty available may be to push a wheelbarrow of materials rather than to actually do climbing and building. While this may seem reasonable to the employer, if an injury to a limb is significant, this activity may be completely inappropriate and could aggravate the patients' conditions. Hence, if you know that appropriate “light duty” is not available, you should order complete rest.

5 The date of issue of medical certificates has to be the day of consultation or medical treatment. Post or back-dating the day of issue is not allowed.



For the period of coverage, generally the start date is the day of issue. However, the date you begin coverage may be before the date of issue where it is clear that the patients' absence from work prior to the date of issue is consistent with their clinical presentation.

The period of coverage of medical certificates should generally not begin after the date of issue. The principle is that coverage should not be "anticipatory" in nature. Although coverage ought to start at least from the date of issue of the medical certificate, there may be sensible reasons for you to post-date the start of coverage, such as when patients see you after work on the day of issue, thus not requiring coverage on that day, or seeing you at the start of a weekend or public holiday, when coverage is also not necessary. If you post-date the coverage of a medical certificate, you should document your reasons for doing so.

- 6 **You must not amend the particulars on medical certificates issued by other doctors. If you disagree with the provisions of other doctors' medical certificates, you may issue new medical certificates. However, you must only do this after assessing the patients yourself to determine that this is justified on medical grounds and, where appropriate and possible, consulting the other doctors before you do so.**



There may be instances where you are asked to review patients who bear medical certificates issued by other doctors but you disagree with the provisions of the medical certificates. Your disagreement should not be based on suspicion (for example, suspicion that a national serviceman has feigned an illness and is malingering) but ought to be based on your own clinical assessment of the patients.

It is often helpful for you to discuss the cases with the doctors who issued the original certificates, provided you are able to contact them, in order to understand their rationale for the certificates they provided. Sometimes they may have information or a perspective that is not obvious to you that would justify the original certificates. On the other hand, having heard your current assessment of the patients, the doctors may agree that your proposed changes are justified and agree with you.

Sometimes patients may have obtained the medical certificates while abroad, in which case there may be practical difficulties in contacting the doctors. How much effort you should make to contact the original doctors depends on how likely it is that they have information that would be material to your current assessment of the patients.

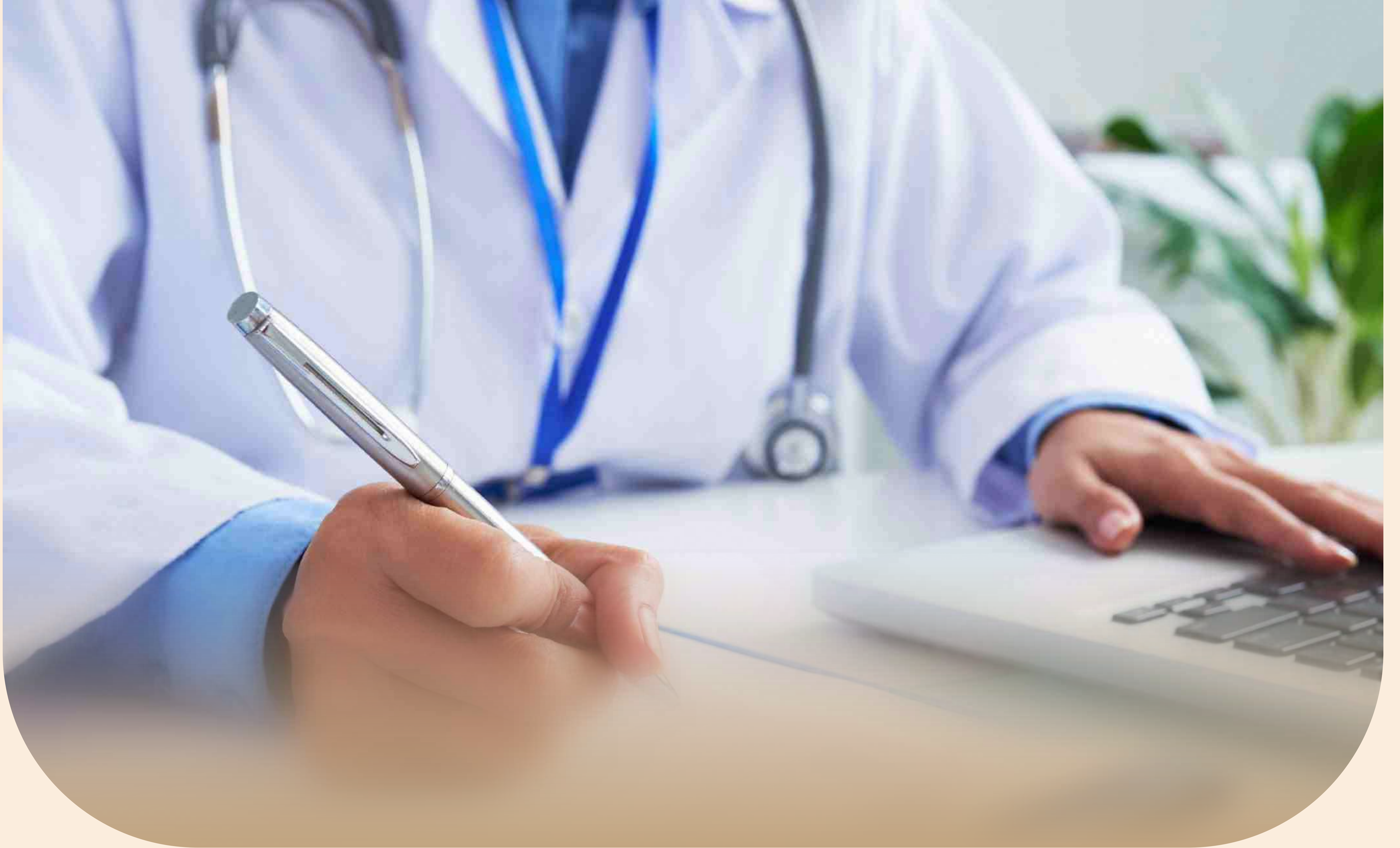
Once you determine that changes in the provisions of the medical certificates are medically justified, you may issue new medical certificates. You should not simply amend the provisions on the original certificates as they were not issued by you and you do not have the right to alter any detail on them.

7 For medical confidentiality you ought not to disclose the patients' diagnoses on their medical certificates unless patients have consented to this.



In general, the persons to whom patients hand their medical certificates at their places of work or study do not have an automatic right to know their staff or students' confidential medical information. As with all third party disclosures, patients need to consent to the disclosures.

Sometimes employers will contact doctors to try to find out more about the patients' medical conditions that are revealed on the medical certificates. Again, unless you have patients' consent, such information cannot be revealed.



- 8 You need to sign medical certificates personally. If someone has filled in the details on your behalf, you need to be satisfied that the details are correct before signing.**

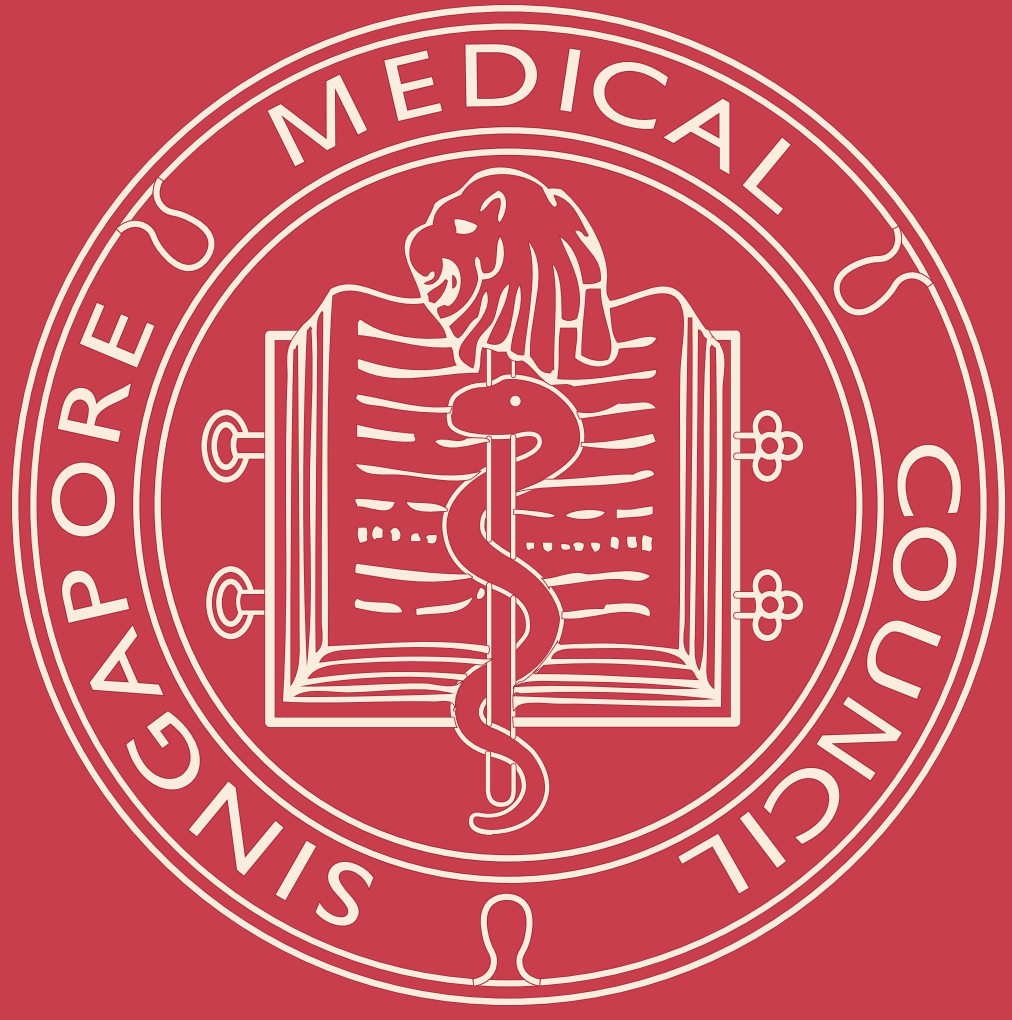


Medical certificates are documents that carry professional and legal implications. Hence you have to sign them personally and not allow someone else to sign them on your behalf. If you signed a medical certificate with incorrect details written on your behalf, you would still be responsible for the information filled in.

9 **You have to ensure that however medical certificates are generated, there are security measures and protocols to prevent fraudulent issuance of the certificates.**



Medical certificates may be generated entirely on paper or electronically. The risk of fraudulent use may be higher when they are input into a computer system to be printed out elsewhere. Where you are in a position to control the systems in use, you need to ensure that no one can issue medical certificates without your knowledge. If you are not in control of the systems, your responsibility would be to abide by the security protocols in place so that you do not inadvertently provide an unauthorised person access to the system.



SMC Newsletter

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