

SUMMARY

DR. ROBERT PALMER (CPSO #54168)

1. Disposition

On April 21, 2017, the Inquiries, Complaints and Reports Committee (“the Committee”) ordered general surgeon Dr. Palmer to complete a specified continuing education and remediation program (“SCERP”). The SCERP requires Dr. Palmer to:

- Complete one-to-one instruction on communication to the satisfaction of the College
- Review College policy #3-16, *Physician Behaviour in the Professional Environment*, and the College publication, *The Practice Guide*
- Prepare written summaries of the above-noted policy and guide and submit them to the College to ensure completeness of the review
- Undergo a reassessment of his practice approximately three months following completion of the education program.

2. Introduction

An individual complained to the College that, since mid-2016, Dr. Palmer engaged in unprofessional and disruptive behaviour in the workplace, including rude, profane, disrespectful, insulting, demeaning and bullying innuendos and behaviour, arguments and outbursts of anger, and mocking and shaming of colleagues involved in the provision of health care.

Dr. Palmer acknowledged that he spoke to two staff members in a loud voice on a specific occasion but indicated that the staff members had spoken to him first in a loud and disruptive manner. He conceded that speaking in a loud voice was inappropriate and apologized for having done so.

Dr. Palmer further acknowledged that he described the complainant as a “psychopathic troublemaker” when discussing her conduct with the medical director of the clinic. He indicated

he made this statement in the context of informing the medical director of the dysfunction within the clinic.

Dr. Palmer reported that he also described the complainant as a psychopathic troublemaker during private conversations with various new nurses on staff when describing some of the problems in the clinic. Dr. Palmer indicated that he regretted using the phrase “psychopathic troublemaker” in reference to the complainant and apologized to the complainant for his description of her.

The complainant noted that Dr. Palmer’s meeting with the medical director of the clinic, when the medical director asked him not to refer to her as a psychopathic troublemaker, took place some months before Dr. Palmer told two staff members in separate conversations that she had mental problems and was a “psycho.”

In response, Dr. Palmer expressed regret for using the word “psycho” in reference to the complainant in his conversations with the two staff members. He extended his apologies to the complainant for referring to her in this way.

3. Committee Process

A General Panel of the Committee, consisting of public and physician members, met to review the relevant records and documents related to the complaint. The Committee always has before it applicable legislation and regulations, along with policies that the College has developed, which reflect the College’s professional expectations for physicians practising in Ontario. Current versions of these documents are available on the College’s website at www.cpso.on.ca, under the heading “Policies & Publications.”

4. Committee’s Analysis

The College policy *Physician Behaviour in the Professional Environment* sets out that physicians “are expected to act in a respectful, courteous and civil manner” towards their patients and colleagues on the basis that doing so “fosters an atmosphere of trust, shared accountability and collaboration.”

The policy further states that unprofessional or disruptive behaviour undermines medical professionalism and the trust of the public. The policy provides examples of disruptive behaviour, including:

- Rude, profane, disrespectful, insulting, threatening, bullying, or abusive language, tone, innuendos and behaviour
- Comments or actions that may be perceived as harassing or may contribute to a poisoned work environment
- Mocking, shaming, disparaging or censuring patients, colleagues, and others involved in the provision of health care.

In the Committee's view, Dr. Palmer's acknowledged conduct in referring to the complainant as a psychopathic troublemaker or a "psycho" or as having a mental illness can be considered disruptive behaviour according to the definition in the policy. Dr. Palmer's comments about the complainant were disparaging and disrespectful and may have contributed to a poisoned work environment. It appears that Dr. Palmer's conduct interfered with his ability to collaborate with his colleagues and may have interfered with the delivery of quality health care or the safety or perceived safety of others, particularly the complainant.

In the circumstances, the Committee decided to require Dr. Palmer to complete the SCERP described above.