

SUMMARY

DR. LAURIE LYNN WELLS (CPSO# 58621)

1. Disposition

On January 24, 2018, the Inquiries, Complaints and Reports Committee (the Committee) required family physician Dr. Wells to appear before a panel of the Committee to be cautioned with respect to overstepping professional boundaries, the College's *Third Party Reports* policy, using professional qualifications in a personal setting, and giving professional opinions on individuals who are not her patients.

2. Introduction

The patient complained to the College that Dr. Wells wrote a personal letter of support regarding divorce proceedings for the patient's ex-husband (who is a personal friend of Dr. Wells) on hospital letterhead, and cited her credentials and knowledge as a physician. Further, she complained that the letter contained inaccurate, inappropriate information about her and her loved ones, despite the fact that Dr. Wells had not provided medical care to any of them.

Dr. Wells responded that she should not have used professional letterhead for the letter, and that she must have used that letterhead out of habit because of the short timeline she had to write the letter. She said that she stated in the letter that she was not writing in a professional capacity, but felt she was within her rights to cite her credentials and knowledge as a physician. She indicated that she did not diagnose any individuals in her letter, but simply reported her observations about them that she felt were relevant to the situation.

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 Committee was concerned that Dr. Wells did not fully understand why her personal letter of support was inappropriate, noting that she acknowledged only that it was inappropriate for the letter to be on professional letterhead. In the Committee's view, Dr. Wells' decision to cite her credentials and medical knowledge in the letter could cause the information to be viewed as a medical opinion. Further, Dr. Wells does mention possible diagnoses in the letter. This was inappropriate as she never treated any of the individuals mentioned in the letter, and caused the letter to seem like a third-party report given in a professional capacity. The Committee believes that Dr. Wells would benefit from reviewing the College's *Third Party Reports* policy, in order to ensure that all letters that reference her professional capacity as a physician are appropriate.

The Committee was also concerned that many details of the letter seemed like they were obtained second-hand, and indicated a possible bias in favour of the ex-husband. In the Committee's view, if Dr. Wells was determined to write the personal letter of support, she should have limited herself to her first-hand knowledge of the situation. Further, she should have taken far greater care to avoid citing her credentials, opining on a possible diagnosis, and placing the letter on professional letterhead.

Although Dr. Wells stated that she wrote the letter within a very short timeline, the letter was long and in-depth, and does not appear like it was written quickly or without thought. Further, given Dr. Wells' background in psychotherapy and psychiatry, the Committee was surprised that she would agree to write such a letter at all. Her background should have alerted her that

her relationship with the ex-husband and her positioning as a health professional in the letter raised possible boundary issues.