



Australasian Society of
Aesthetic Plastic
Surgeons™

Excellence in cosmetic surgery™

Social Media Guidelines for Plastic Surgeons

Treating patients and plastic surgery with respect
and ethical conduct.



Advertising guidance & interacting with patients on social media

As a registered health practitioner, there are various obligations that you and your business must consider when advertising regulated health services. This includes being accountable for advertising published in your name or the name of your business via your staff or external marketing companies.

As AHPRA and the National Boards' guidelines for advertising a regulated health service state:

“In the context of advertising a regulated health service, advertising includes all forms of verbal, printed and electronic communication that promotes and seeks to attract a person to a regulated health service provider and/or to attract a person to use the regulated health service. Social media is also often used to advertise a regulated health service.”

— AHPRA ADVERTISING GUIDELINES

The Medical Board of Australia have stressed the importance of interacting with patients through designated professional healthcare communication channels instead of social media. They state:

“Doctors should also be aware of the potential risks of engaging with patients through social media.

Social media can blur professional and personal boundaries and may affect the nature of the doctor-patient relationship. If a patient tries to engage with a doctor through social media or other digital communication about matters outside the professional relationship, the doctor should politely decline to interact with them and direct them instead to the doctor's usual professional healthcare communication channels.”

— MEDICAL BOARD OF AUSTRALIA

To help you navigate your obligations and ensure you're treating both your patients and plastic surgery with respect and ethical conduct, see our checklists regarding the following (*click to jump to each section*):

- [Patient privacy](#)
- [Before and afters](#)
- [Sexualising or making light of surgery](#)
- [Testimonials](#)

Patient privacy



Ensuring patient privacy is essential in any publicly available material, especially when it comes to advertising.

Even if your patient has consented to advertising and being potentially identifiable, considerations need to be made to ensure they truly understand what they are agreeing to and they don't feel obligated or under any pressure to agree.

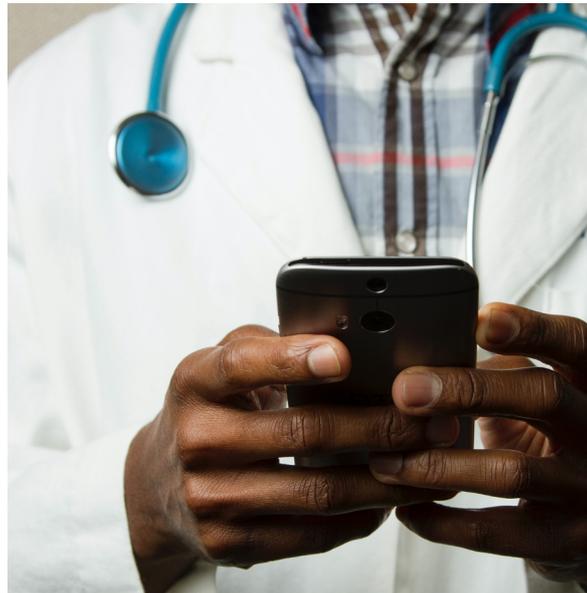
Instead of editing photos to ensure patient privacy is protected, consider taking photos in a way that reduces risk.

For example, taking photos up close and directly of the surgical area as opposed to photos that show unnecessary areas of the patient.

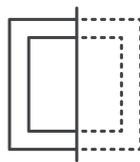
CHECKLIST (click to mark off)

To ensure an appropriate standard of advertising, patient images and text:

- Do not contain unique jewellery
- Do not contain birthmarks, freckles, scars
- Do not contain tattoos
- Do not contain demographic information — e.g. age, location, family status, profession, number of children
- Do not contain metadata of photos or other files (patient's name disclosed)



Before and afters



Clinical before and after images can be helpful resources for prospective patients, if:

- Appropriate care is taken to ensure the images are as similar as possible,
- The images have not been manipulated through posture or editing, and
- Prospective patients are aware that their results may look different.

Before and after images should not be edited in any way beyond cropping and censoring. This includes aesthetic themes on social media or websites (such as putting colour tinges on photos or changing the images to greyscale). Any editing can be misleading or deceptive.

Selfie images are increasingly being published by providers on social media to advertise cosmetic surgery. Selfies are images patients have taken of themselves, or are photos of the patient not in a clinical setting. They are problematic for a number of reasons:

- They are likely against AHPRA’s Advertising Guidelines and also against the Medical Board’s guidelines.
- There is no guarantee that the patient hasn’t manipulated the photo through editing apps or filtering.
- The patient is often posing or otherwise controlling their image, meaning surgery isn’t the only thing contributing to how they look.



- There is no reference to how the patient looked beforehand, meaning there is no clear way to see what role the procedure played in the benefit seen in the image.
 - Even if a clinical or other ‘before’ selfie is published as well, these images will not be as similar as possible in terms of posture, lighting, exposure, contrast, clothing, make-up, and positioning.

Publishing photos and videos of patients that are not clinical and unedited images could be misleading and deceptive to prospective patients and could create unreasonable expectations of beneficial treatment. These are both against AHPRA’s guidelines and are a risk to providers if they engage in this.

CHECKLIST (click to mark off)

To ensure an appropriate standard of advertising, before and after images:

- Are the same camera angle
- Are the same background
- Are the same framing
- Are the same exposure
- Contain the patient with the same posture, clothing and/or make-up
- Have consistent lighting or contrast
- Have the referenced treatment or procedure as the only visible change to the person being photographed

Images are not:

- Selfies of patients
- Edited or contain filters (sparkles, glow, etc)
- In greyscale or other colour tinges

Sexualising or making light of surgery



The glamorisation of cosmetic surgery is against the Medical Board's guidelines. This should make all cosmetic surgery providers wary of the way they are using imagery and language to market their services.

An increasing trend on social media is for providers to publish photos and videos sent in by their patients. These photos often contain patients:

- In a state of undress that is unnecessary or inappropriate in medical advertising,
- Posing in a way that accentuates parts of their body,
- Who are in a glamorous setting or wearing glamorous clothing,
- Are in lingerie or have been sexualised in other ways.

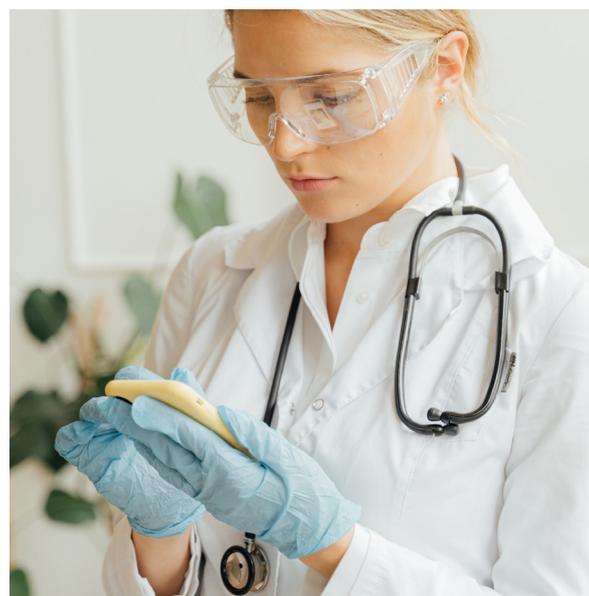
These images are adding to the lure of cosmetic surgery and ultimately tell audiences that they can attain that look with cosmetic surgery. This can be misleading and lead to unrealistic expectations.

The wording used in social media posts by providers is also of concern. Using the word 'perfect' to describe results, and using the word 'magic' to describe a procedure or the skill of a

provider both lead to unrealistic expectations in advertising, and are likely against the advertising guidelines. Providers should be wary of using any kind of language like 'life-changing' or 'amazing results', as these can create an unreasonable expectation of beneficial treatment.

An emerging issue in advertising cosmetic surgery on social media is the use of emojis. These are problematic because they can make light of cosmetic surgery, make it appear fun or playful and can also appeal to children. Emojis and other additions, such as music, sparkles, bright colours or colour themes on social media profiles can also result in children being intended or unintended targets of marketing. Similar issues occurred in the vaping industry, causing an epidemic among young people who may never have otherwise smoked nicotine.

It is also important that providers adequately inform the public of the risks of surgery and



that individual results may be different to the benefits seen in the image, as well as for providers to include a risk statement in ‘story’ features, or expiring content, as this is still classed as advertising.

CHECKLIST (click to mark off)

To ensure an appropriate standard of advertising, the posts do not:

- Contain emojis or other icons
- Use popular or inappropriate music
- Contain bright colours or colour themes
- Use inappropriate language around cosmetic surgery — e.g. “body goals”, “body inspiration”
- Use language like “magic” and “art” when referring to surgically enhanced looks, a procedure, or a provider’s skills
- Use language like “perfect” to describe results or outcomes
- Use language that suggests cosmetic surgery can cure or solve self-esteem issues
- Glamorise surgery through language — e.g. “glam goals”, “Friday glam”, etc
- Glamorise surgery through imagery — patients in glamorous clothing, settings, or appearance
- Sexualise patients — e.g. lingerie, provocative posing or suggestive language

The posts:

- Contain an adequate risk statement (this includes in-story features)

Testimonials



Practitioners must not use positive statements in their advertising about the results or benefits patients have claimed to experience due to surgery.

The 2020 AHPRA Advertising Guidelines state: *“In the context of the National Law, testimonials are recommendations or positive statements about the clinical aspects of a regulated health service used in advertising”.*

Setting patient expectations before they make first contact with the clinic is important. Testimonials and patient journeys can cause prospective patients to form an emotional connection with the surgery. Thus advertising in a way that does not set high or unreasonable expectations helps protect both patients and doctors.

Testimonials often contain language that suggests a person’s life has improved, confidence has skyrocketed, or that their doctor is superior to other providers. Patients might genuinely believe what they are saying, but individual results can vary greatly.

Testimonials can go a long way in convincing vulnerable people that body dysmorphia or poor self-esteem can be cured through surgery, ultimately sending a message that their lives can be quickly improved.

The power of testimonials means using them in advertising at best departs from good practice, and at worst is manipulative and dangerous.

Other issues around testimonials include:

- A patient might genuinely like the outcome of their surgery and provide a testimonial to be used in advertising, but often the results aren't clear for a few months. When swelling subsides, it's not uncommon to hear that a patient is unhappy with the end result.
- Prospective patients reading the testimonial do not know the circumstances of the person who had surgery.
- Testimonials do not often go into full and complete detail about risks, pain levels, discomfort, complications and missed work, school and/or parenting obligations.



CHECKLIST (click to mark off)

To ensure an appropriate standard of advertising, the posts do not:

- Positive statements shared by patients — e.g. about a clinical aspect or outcome
- Recommendations shared by patients — e.g. “Go to my surgeon, they are the best!”
- Private messages from patients expressing positivity about the surgery or results
- Posts or stories shared by a patient on their social media and re-shared by a provider
- Photos of gifts patients have given providers following their surgery
- Patient journeys of any kind

This guidance is not a full and complete list of issues present in cosmetic surgery advertising online. Providers should not limit their advertising compliance to this guidance alone.

Resources

AHPRA & National Boards — Guidelines for advertising a regulated health service (Dec 2020) Patient Privacy

<https://www.ahpra.gov.au/documents/default.aspx?record=WD20/30461&dbid=AP&chksum=0sNkdBzefE4jEabpVY862A%3d%3d>

Australian Medical Association (AMA) and the Medical Indemnity Industry Association of Australia (MIIAA) — Clinical images and the use of personal mobile devices (Sep 2014)

https://ama.com.au/sites/default/files/documents/FINAL_AMA_Clinical_Images_Guide.pdf

Study: Compliance of plastic surgeons with advertising guidelines (Mar 2019)

<https://ajops.com/index.php/ajops/article/view/103>

Medical Board of Australia — Guidelines for registered medical practitioners who perform cosmetic medical and surgical procedures (Oct 2019)

<https://www.medicalboard.gov.au/Codes-Guidelines-Policies/Cosmetic-medical-and-surgical-procedures-guidelines.aspx>

RACGP — Using personal mobile devices for clinical photos in general practice (Apr 2019)

<https://www.racgp.org.au/FSDEDEV/media/documents/Running%20a%20practice/Practice%20resources/Using-personal-mobile-devices-for-clinical-photos.pdf>



Contact Us

For more information, support and guidance on how ASAPS can promote positive growth and reputation for your plastic surgery practice and business ventures, please contact us on +61 2 9437 0495 or admin@asaps.org.au.

You can connect with ASAPS online:

Website: aestheticplasticsurgeons.org.au

Facebook: facebook.com/asaps.org.au

Twitter: twitter.com/asapsau

Instagram: instagram.com/asapsau