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CDBC Position Statement on Testimonials

College of Dietitians of British Columbia

Accountability for ethical, client-centered services is an advantage for both Dietitians and members of the public, as it represents the provision of services such that the public's best interest and public trust are maintained. There are questions as to how testimonials can be considered in the best interest of the client, when they serve to benefit a dietitian's own interest and advance their professional profile and business growth.

A **testimonial can be defined as** a published personal statement from a client about the services they have received from a dietitian; including before and after photography. This includes statements on any form of a registrant's marketing and does not include statements made on a client's own social media profile. Reviews of published material, including books, where a dietitian is not actively promoting professional products or services, does not constitute a testimonial, nor does a testimonial include a review of products where there is no potential or current dietitian-client therapeutic relationship established. Unsolicited reviews on public forums (Yelp or Google Reviews, for example) are not considered testimonials.

Concerns regarding testimonials are often cited as relating to going against a health profession's Code of Ethics in that a testimonial could cause statements that cannot be verified, state false information, or *"create in the mind of the recipient or intended recipient an unjustified expectation about the results which the registrant can achieve."* (CDBC Bylaws, s. 74(4)(b))

The [Health Professions Act](#), which governs regulated healthcare professions in BC, mandates that "A College has the following objects:... to establish, monitor and enforce standards of professional ethics among registrants" and "a board may make bylaws to... establish standards of professional ethics for registrants, including standards for the avoidance of conflict of interest."

The majority of regulated health professions in BC, and indeed, across Canada, have very similar definitions of the terms "marketing" and "advertisement" in their bylaws. In addition, most of the Colleges include wording such that any marketing/advertising must not be unverifiable, false, inaccurate, misleading/misrepresentative of services provided, nor can they advertise services that go against professions' code of ethics and standards of practice. Furthermore, many of these regulated professions include statements that require avoidance of allowing members of the public to feel that they can achieve an unreasonable outcome.

The CDBC is no different in that regard, in that section 74 of the [College Bylaws](#) outlines the requirements for marketing within the profession, translating into [Standard of Practice](#) 17, the [CDBC Code of Ethics](#) and the newly developed CDBC [Marketing Standards](#). The following risks were identified to support the CDBC's position on banning testimonials:

- **Risk of selection bias**

Just as a dietitian would not select specific research to come to an evidence-based statement, a dietitian should not choose solely positive testimonials to publish, while leaving less desirable ones unpublished. Most often, clients who are prepared to share testimonials directly to their practitioners are too positively biased. Testimonials are not representative of all clients' experiences/opinion of services received. Additionally, experience from clients may not be related at all to the dietitians' competencies and skills, whether the testimonial is positive or negative.

- **Risk of blurring of professional boundary**

Testimonials may cause a confusing role for the client in the therapeutic relationship, who may question whether their level of care will be compromised if no testimonial is provided. Clients may feel pressured to leave a positive review or to participate in before/after photos to maintain a good therapeutic relationship with the dietitian. There can be perceptions from clients that the dietitian is only providing good care to "look good" for the testimonials creating a false sense of client-centered care.

- **Risk of misleading the public**

Both testimonials and before/after photos can give the false impression that members of the public could achieve the same results as the ones shared in testimonials and before/after photos (for example: weight loss, GI symptom (bloating/distension relief), micronutrient deficiency resolution (skin/hair changes), wound healing etc.)

- **Risk of privacy breach**

Dietitians registered in BC have a duty to protect private information about their clients ([Code of Ethics, Standard of Practice](#) (5), and CDIBC [Privacy Guide](#)). Use of client testimonials may violate that requirement for keeping a client's health information private. Depending on the information in the testimonial, a client may become recognizable to another member of the public. This is also applicable in the example of before/after photos or client's information published on social media when dietitians participate to a discussion forum.

Given a similar position within many other regulated professions in BC and in Canada, CDIBC is moving to ban testimonials, including before/after photos.

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