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Restrict the term ‘surgeon’ to protect patients, AMA tells hearing

The Australian Medical Association has told a parliamentary committee examining new laws to regulate cosmetic surgery, that strict rules on who can be called a ‘surgeon’ are needed in the National Law to protect patients.

AMA national Vice President Dr Danielle McMullen and AMA (WA) President and plastic and reconstructive surgeon, Dr Mark Duncan-Smith appeared before a hearing of Queensland’s Health and Environment Committee which is scrutinising the proposed Health Practitioner Regulation National Law (Surgeons) Amendment Bill 2023.

They told the hearing that only medical practitioners who have completed the necessary rigorous training in surgery approved by an Australian Medical Council accredited medical college that provides surgical training should be able to call themselves surgeons.

Under the current arrangements, any medical practitioner with general registration may use the title ‘surgeon’. The AMA has long advocated for this to be amended.

“We’re relieved health ministers have finally acted to close this loophole, even if it has taken some harrowing reports in the media about cosmetic procedures going wrong to bring us to this point,” Dr McMullen said.

Like many in the community, Dr Duncan-Smith said he’d been sickened by media stories of terrible harm caused by some unscrupulous practitioners able to call themselves ‘cosmetic surgeons’ yet who have not undergone many years of specialist training in surgery before putting people under the knife.

“Patients and the community in general have a reasonable expectation that all practitioners currently calling themselves a surgeon have a recognised surgical qualification, having successfully completed a significant program of post-school education, including basic medical training and formal, accredited post-graduate surgical training.

“We support the passage of this Bill because it will help patients understand which health practitioners have undertaken the necessary training to safely perform surgical procedures,” Dr Duncan-Smith said.

The AMA was broadly supportive of the Bill, but noted that limiting the focus to just medical practitioners meant that other health practitioners, such as podiatrists, could continue to use the title ‘surgeon’.

“We do think the Bill could be improved by removing the ability of non-medically trained practitioners, such as podiatrists, from being able to use the title surgeon, which implies a level of training and supervised experience that is substantially beyond the requirements of a podiatric qualification.” Dr McMullen said.

The AMA also opposed allowing the Ministerial Council to grant the use of the title ‘surgeon’ as this could undermine the intention of the Bill and bypass existing professional standards.

[Read the AMA’s submission to the inquiry.](#)

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