

Searching for Professionals on Google

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Health regulators have long faced criticism that they lack transparency and that they hide information about their members from the public. This criticism is often frustrating for regulators, particularly because a regulator's governing statute often prevents them from disclosing the information.

However, every enabling statute allows regulators to share at least some information with the public, and one of the primary ways that regulators achieve transparency is through their public registers. As most readers of this newsletter know, a regulator's public register is typically a searchable database found on the regulator's website that contains the names of all members (and sometimes former members) along with specific information about each member, including whether the member has been subject to disciplinary or other regulatory action. The public register is a great tool that can be used to uncover information about regulated professionals, but, unfortunately, many members of the public do not know that such registers exist, let alone how to access them. Some regulators even require that users answer skill-testing questions to verify that they are not "bots", which arguably makes the information contained on the registers less accessible.

In our experience, when the average computer-savvy person wants to screen a health care professional, they turn to a search engine such as Google. Because of that, we wanted to see if a professional's register entry (or any information from the regulator) would appear in Google search results. We therefore conducted our own informal survey where we Googled the names of members of the 26 health care regulators in Ontario under the *Regulated Health Professions Act, 1991* to see what information was coming up on the Google search engine.

Here is what we found:

- **No discipline:** When we Googled the names of health care professionals who were not subject to discipline or another form of public regulatory action (such as a caution or a specified continuing education or remedial program), there were very few search results from regulators' websites; 20 out of the 26 regulators (77%) did not appear in Google. This may help explain why many members of the public do not know about the existence of regulators' public registers.
- **Current discipline:** We next Googled the names of health care professionals who were currently subject to discipline proceedings. Note that two of the 26 regulators surveyed did not have any members who were currently subject to disciplinary proceedings at the time we conducted this search. Of the remaining 24 regulators, results from 19 regulators (79%) came up on Google when we searched for the names of members currently facing disciplinary action.
- **Past discipline:** Results from 16 of the 26 health regulators (62%) appeared in Google for members who had been subject to discipline in the past. For five of the 26 regulators (19%), a member subject to past disciplinary proceedings did not consistently show up in Google, and there were

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no results that appeared from the remaining five health regulators when we searched their members who had previously been subject to disciplinary proceedings.

- **Other outcomes:** We also Googled members who had been subject to other public regulatory outcomes (e.g. cautions, specified continuing education or remedial programs or undertakings). These outcomes were harder to search, and for eight of the 26 regulators we were unable to conduct the search because we did not know the names of members to Google. Of the 18 professions we did search, only four regulators showed those outcomes in Google (22%). No results showed up in Google for the other 14 regulators (78%).

These results suggest that potentially valuable information is not appearing on the platform that is often used by the public to choose health care professionals and to check if there are any red flags. Anecdotally, we understand that many regulators may not want public register results to be searchable on Google because of concerns related to member privacy and the resultant spam mail that members may receive. However, anything that is posted on a regulator's public register is, by definition, public. Regulators may want to consider doing more to make sure that public information is accessible to the public in a meaningful and practical way, including by ensuring that the information is searchable on Google.

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