

# Could you just sign this for me please doctor?

**GPs are often asked to sign forms for patients or their carers but may justifiably feel uneasy about signing some of these forms, writes Stephen O'Leary**

**THE ROLE OF A GP** is undoubtedly wide-ranging. By the very nature of general practice, patients attend with all sorts of issues and requests. On occasion, the form will be left into reception with no consultation having taken place and no background provided.

While many such requests will relate to typical forms that a GP may be familiar with, and will be more than happy to sign, there are others such as those relating to participating in endurance events or a firearm licence which a GP might, understandably, have some reservations about. Then there are the requests, often from family members, about signing a form enabling them to collect a patient's social welfare, or claim a tax credit in respect of a patient. In such circumstances, what is a doctor to do?

Paragraph 41 of the Medical Council's Guide to Professional Conduct & Ethics, 8th edition ("the Guide") states that: "In issuing certificates, reports, prescriptions and other formal documents, you must be accurate and make sure the document is legible. You must also include your Medical Council registration number. You should only sign a certificate, prescription, report or document following a review of the patient's condition."

Paragraph 40.2 of the Guide which covers medical reports states: "Reports must be relevant, factual, accurate and not misleading. Their content must not be influenced by

financial or other inducements or pressures." It is important before signing any form or certificate that you take the time to review it fully and understand what exactly is being requested of you. This will enable you to determine whether it is actually appropriate for you to sign the form.

**“ It is important not to feel pressurised to sign a form, no matter how much you want to help your patient. ”**

If the request is being made by someone other than the patient concerned, then you should ensure that you have the patient's consent where appropriate. Some typical requests that can arise are addressed here.

*The sibling of a patient with a mild intellectual disability asks you to sign a form permitting them to collect your patient's pension on medical grounds.*

The first step in such a scenario is to consult with your patient to ascertain the reason for the request. The presumption is that the patient has capacity. If there has not been any change in the patient's circumstances, and there is no medical reason why the patient cannot collect their own social welfare payment, then you should decline to sign the form.

In most instances, the request will have been made with good intentions. However, if you have any concerns, you should contact HSE's National Safeguarding Office for vulnerable persons.

*A fitness-oriented patient in his mid-40s with a history of minor cardiac issues drops in a form requesting you to confirm that they are fit to participate in an endurance event this weekend that they are adamant about participating in.*

Scenarios such as this can be difficult as the patient does not always foresee there being any issue with you signing off on their participation and they have a registration deadline to meet. In this case, the patient keeps very fit.

However, they have had some cardiac issues in the past, and while these were minor, you are not in a position to be definitive about whether it is safe for the patient to participate in such an activity without input from his cardiologist. If it is not possible to get input from the patient's cardiologist at such short notice, you will have to explain the patient why you can't sign the form as requested.

*The local Garda has called the surgery to check whether you would have any concerns about a gun licence being issued to one of your patients.*

When applying for a firearms licence, the application form (Form FCA1) requires the patient to answer the following question: "Do you suffer from, or have you been diagnosed or treated for any medical condition (physical/mental) that may affect your ability to possess, carry or use firearms, safely?"

According to the Garda Commissioner's Guidelines to the Practical Application and Operation of the Firearms Act, 1925-2009, approaches to an applicant's general practitioner should not be made as a matter of routine but are at the discretion of the superintendent/chief superintendent considering the application.

If you receive such a request, it is best to call the patient in for a review so that they can be assessed. You should ensure that the patient is consenting to you providing a report to the Gardaí. If you have any concerns about a particular aspect of the patient's physical or mental health that may impact on their ability to use a firearm safely, you should refer them for specialist review.

*As summer gets into full swing, you may be asked to sign "Fit to Fly" forms for patients who are pregnant. What are the main considerations?*

While previously airlines may have simply accepted a letter from a patient's GP stating that they were not aware of any reason why a patient could not fly, airlines are increasingly producing their own template forms. When completing such a form, it is important to ensure that you convey any information that you think may be clinically relevant.

If there is a comments box, you can use this to qualify any information as necessary that has been provided on the form. You should ensure that you have informed and explicit consent from the patient to provide the relevant information. Airlines can have different requirements and time limits for pregnant patients that are flying with them so be sure to review each form carefully.

*The parents of a 19-year-old patient have contacted you to request that you sign a form for the bank permitting them to manage their child's bank account given their levels of social anxiety.*

This can be a difficult situation because the patient has capacity and legal authority to manage their own financial affairs. However, if for whatever reason they are unable to attend their bank in person and online banking will not suffice, then it may be appropriate to agree to the request. Before doing so, you should assess the patient to ensure that they are consenting and that it is in their best interests.


As the patient's condition will hopefully improve, any such certificate should be time-limited to the shortest period appropriate. This will ensure that it is kept under review by the bank and will reduce the risk of any complaint from the patient subsequently.

*The staff of a residential centre for patients with intellectual disabilities contacts you to ask if you can provide consent for a patient to undergo significant treatment. The patient has severe intellectual disabilities and is non-verbal. The patient has no family involved in their care, they do not have any decision-making arrangement made under the Assisted Decision Making (Capacity) Act 2015, nor are they a ward of court.*

As a GP, you have no legal authority to give consent on behalf of a patient. There may be times when in the absence of patient consent, you have to act in what you believe to be the patient's best interests as set out in the Guide and the HSE's National Consent Policy. In a scenario such as this, you cannot sign the consent form as requested. Such a form would need to be signed by a person with legal authority to do so pursuant to a decision making arrangement made under the Assisted Decision Making (Capacity) Act, 2015.

However, provided you think the scheduled treatment is in the patient's best interests, you could provide a letter confirming that you are unaware of any medical reason why the patient cannot undergo the treatment and/or provide the treating clinical with any relevant clinical information. It would be important to document your decision-making process carefully in the patient's records.

It is important not to feel pressurised to sign a form, no matter how much you want to help your patient. In accordance with your ethical obligations, you must ensure that anything you sign is relevant, factual, accurate and not misleading, having carried out an up-to-date review of your patient.

If you have any queries or concerns about a form or certificate that you have been asked to sign for a patient, you should contact your medical defence organisation for advice. 

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