



Dr. Robert STEFFEN

Council Decision

Date Charge(s) Laid:	1) June 8, 2024 2) June 8, 2024
Charge(s) Amended:	N/A
Outcome Date:	November 29, 2024
Penalty Hearing:	November 29, 2024
Disposition:	Suspension, Reprimand, Conditions, Costs

The Council of the College of Physicians and Surgeons imposes the following penalties on Dr. Robert Steffen pursuant to The Medical Profession Act, 1981:

- 1) Pursuant to Section 54(1)(b) of the Act, the Council hereby suspends Dr. Steffen for a period of 4 months, commencing at 12:01 a.m. on 2 December 2024 and ending at 11:59 p.m. on 1 April 2025.
- 2) Pursuant to Section 54(1)(e) of the Act, the Council hereby reprimands Dr. Steffen. The format of that reprimand will be in written format.
- 3) Pursuant to Section 54(1)(i) of the Act, the Council directs Dr. Steffen to pay the costs of and incidental to the investigation and hearing in the amount of \$8,853.55 by the date of 31 May 2025.
- 4) Pursuant to Section 54(2) of the Act, if Dr. Steffen should fail to pay the costs as required by paragraph 6, Dr. Steffen’s licence shall be suspended until the costs are paid in full.
- 5) Pursuant to Section 54(1)(g) of the Act, the Council requires that Dr. Steffen successfully complete an Ethics and Professionalism Course and an Anger Management Course acceptable to the Registrar and provide proof of completion. Such course shall be completed on or before 31 May 2025, or any other date as agreed to by the Registrar or their designate. If Dr. Steffen fails to complete the course in the directed timeframe, his licence will be suspended until such time as the courses have been successfully completed.
- 6) The Council reserves to itself the right to reconsider and amend any of the terms of this penalty order if requested to do so by Dr. Steffen.



27 January 2025

Dr. R. Steffen

[REDACTED]

Dr. Steffen:

You pled guilty to 4 charges of unprofessional conduct. The Council of the Physicians and Surgeons of Saskatchewan imposed penalty on you on November 29, 2024. Part of that penalty included a written reprimand.

The Council was repulsed by your physical attacks on two young children. Regardless of the circumstances surrounding these two episodes, this type of action should never have occurred. We, as physicians, pledge to do no harm. Well, harm you did. You also were dishonest in your initial correspondence with the Registrar and you were also found to have been self prescribing. This is the antithesis of what the Council envisions as an ethical and professional physician in practice.

Dr. Robert Steffen you are hereby reprimanded by the Council for your unprofessional conduct.

The Council was encouraged by your early admission to the charges, remorse, attempt at remediation, and ongoing self improvement. We hope that you can reflect on your behaviour over the next 4 months and forge a pathway forward so that this type of unprofessional behaviour never repeats itself.

We do not expect to see you in front of us again.

The Council of the College of Physicians & Surgeons of Saskatchewan

**In the Matter of a Penalty Hearing for Dr. Robert Steffen in front of the Council of the
College of Physicians and Surgeons of Saskatchewan.**

November 29, 2024

Mr. Allan Stonhouse for Dr. Steffen

Mr. Evan Thompson for the Registrar's Office

Introduction

Dr. Robert Steffen is a 51-year-old, family physician. He completed his medical degree in South Africa in 1998 and was first licensed to practice medicine in Saskatchewan in 2001. He is a Fellow of the Canadian College of Family Physicians.

Dr. Steffen has practiced as a family physician at the Family Physicians Group Clinic in Melfort, Saskatchewan for approximately 20 years. Dr. Steffen has privileges within the Saskatchewan Health Authority ("SHA"). Dr. Steffen participates as an on-call emergency physician, provides obstetrical care, and has long-term care clients with hospital inpatients. This includes anesthetic services in the operating room and shifts in the emergency department and labour and delivery unit at the local hospital.

Dr. Steffen pled guilty to four charges of unprofessional conduct, as set out below:

Charge 1

The Council of the College of Physicians and Surgeons directs that, pursuant to Section 47.5 of *The Medical Profession Act, 1981*, the Discipline Committee hear the following charge against Dr. Robert Steffen:

You Dr. Robert Steffen are guilty of unbecoming, improper, unprofessional, or discreditable conduct contrary to the provisions of section 46(o) and/or (p) of *The Medical Profession Act, 1981* and/or CPSS Bylaw 7.2, Code of Conduct, Accountability (a), Respect for Others (a, b), and/or Responsible Behaviour (a, s), the particulars of which are that you physically assaulted a child patient during an office attendance.

The evidence that will be led in support of this charge will include one or more of the following:

- a) On or about February 29th, 2023 Patient #1, who was then eight years old, attended your office for an appointment with his mother;
- b) When you attempted to provide care to patient #1, he was not cooperating and began to pull on a piece of medical equipment, at which point you pulled Patient #1 off of the clinic bed by his arms and placed him on the ground;
- c) You then picked Patient #1 up and spanked him across the buttocks area, then forcibly placed him back into the chair.

Charge 2

You Dr. Robert Steffen are guilty of unbecoming, improper, unprofessional, or discreditable conduct contrary to the provisions of section 46(o) and/or (p) of *The Medical Profession Act, 1981* and/or CPSS Bylaw 7.2, Code of Conduct, Accountability (a), Respect for Others (a, b), and/or Responsible Behaviour (a, s), the particulars of which are that you physically assaulted a child.

The evidence that will be led in support of this charge will include one or more of the following:

a) On or about February 3rd, 2019 you struck a nine-year old child in the face for disobeying a direction.

Charge 3

You Dr. Robert Steffen are guilty of unbecoming, improper, unprofessional, or discreditable conduct contrary to the provisions of section 46(o) and/or (p) of *The Medical Profession Act, 1981*, the particulars of which are that between approximately 2019 and 2023 you inappropriately prescribed yourself medication on one or more occasions.

Charge 4

You Dr. Robert Steffen are guilty of unbecoming, improper, unprofessional, or discreditable conduct contrary to the provisions of section 46(o) and/or 46(p) of *The Medical Profession Act, 1981*; and/or the expectation of honesty included in the Code of Ethics contained in bylaw 7.1; and/or paragraphs (f) and/or (g) under Accountability in the Code of Conduct contained within bylaw 7.2 of the bylaws of the College of Physicians and Surgeons, by providing false and/or misleading information to the College.

The evidence that will be led in support of this charge will include some or all of the following:

- a) You were the subject of a complaint to the College of Physicians and Surgeons in which it was alleged that you had self-prescribed medication.
- b) You were notified of the complaint and provided an opportunity to respond to the complaint.
- c) On or about July 21, 2023, you responded to the College by letter. That letter was false and/or misleading as to one or more of:
 - i. the number of times you had self-prescribed medication;
 - ii. The types and/or number of medications you had self-prescribed;
 - iii. The reasons for and/or circumstances in which you had self-prescribed medication.

The Registrar's Office and Dr. Steffen agreed that an appropriate penalty included a period of suspension, reprimand and costs. They disagreed on the length of the suspension. The Registrar's Office's position was that a suspension of 3 to 5 months was appropriate given the severity of the conduct. Dr Steffen's position was that a 2-to-3 month suspension was appropriate in the circumstances. Other than the admission signed by Dr. Steffen there was no

agreed statement of facts submitted by the parties to Council for the purpose of sentencing however, there was no significant disagreement taken to the facts presented during the hearing as to the circumstances of the offences or the steps taken by Dr. Steffen since the complaints were raised.

Dr. Steffen has no prior discipline history with the College of Physicians and Surgeons (the "College"), or any other regulator.

Dr. Steffen gave an Undertaking to the College on September 21, 2023, which remains in place. The Undertaking requires he have a practice monitor present for any professional encounter with patients under 16 years of age as part of his clinical practice. Dr. Steffen is responsible for ensuring training and compensation of the practice monitor. Pursuant to the terms of the Undertaking, the practice monitor is required to:

- (i) be approved by the College in advance;
- (ii) have met with the Deputy Registrar (or delegate) to review their role and responsibilities;
- (iii) to report to the College; and
- (iv) to be identified on medical records.

As required, the Undertaking was provided to the SHA, so the SHA could impose requirements on Dr. Steffen's practice within SHA facilities. As of the date of these submissions, an informal arrangement is in place, whereby Dr. Steffen is required to have a chaperone present for any patient encounter in SHA facilities. The chaperone can be a nurse or colleague physician and must be aware of the requirements for a chaperone.

The restrictions imposed on Dr. Steffen through his Undertaking are published on the College Website.

On March 11, 2024, Dr. Steffen pled guilty to assault on his stepson which occurred on or about February 5, 2019, contrary to section 266 of *the Criminal Code*. This guilty plea resulted in:

- (a) a conditional discharge; and
- (b) 12-month probation order requiring:
 - (i) regular reporting to probation officer – every 2 months;
 - (ii) participation in assessments and to complete programing as told to do so by probation officer; and
 - (iii) no contact with his stepson.

Dr. Steffen submitted evidence that he has complied with the probation order.

Council agreed with the parties that a suspension, reprimand, costs and continuation of the undertaking were an appropriate penalty. The main issue to be determined was the length of the suspension.

The following is a summary of the arguments for Dr. Steffen, for the Registrar's Office and the Council's reasons for decision.

Position of Dr. R. Steffen

The charges are understood by Dr. Steffen and he has voluntarily pleaded guilty to them. Dr. Steffen was charged criminally for the first assault. He has been fully cooperative with the Registrar's Office and the Preliminary Inquiry Committee with regards to the two complaints. Dr. Steffen acknowledges that his initial response minimized his self prescribing and was not accurate. However, Dr. Steffen corrected for the College, through his legal counsel, any inaccurate information he may have provided regarding the frequency of his self prescribing and the medications involved.

There was no need for a hearing and acknowledged that his actions are worthy of sanctions.

He has suffered tremendously, left the family home in June of 2023, has had unwanted media attention, and the criminal conviction. He has been working with an undertaking since September of 2023. There have been no recurrences of the behavior since the 2023 incident. He has been compliant with his probation officer. He has engaged with the PHP of the SMA for many years and this continues. He is attending psychotherapy regularly and is in a better place. He has taken the CMPA course Successful Patient Interactions.

Dr. Steffen has no prior discipline matters or criminal convictions. He is ashamed of his behavior and the difficult situation he put the medical student in. Dr. Steffen feels the public is protected with the undertaking in place, his ongoing therapy and remediation.

Dr. Steffen references *Coneys* and *Albertyn* decisions by this Council as precedent setting cases.

The *Coneys* case involved a criminal conviction for a domestic assault and the *Albertyn* involved criminal harassment. Neither involved a child or patient.

Dr. Steffen agrees that a reprimand, costs and a suspension are appropriate and submits that a 2–3-month suspension is warranted.

Position of the Registrar's Office

Dr. Steffen has admitted to two charges of unprofessional behavior that involve physical assault. He has shown a loss of control on two occasions, separated by several years and are both serious in nature. The 2019 incident with his stepson and the 2023 incident in the office setting in front of a medical student. The nature and gravity of these two offences are very significant. Physical assault is one of the worst offences a physician may commit.

Dr. Steffen also pled guilty to being dishonest to the Registrar's Office and self prescribing. These were identified by the Preliminary Inquiry Committee. These in themselves are serious breaches of professionalism worthy of sanction.

Dr. Steffen was placed under a practice restriction in 2023. This continues today.

Dr. Steffen has been cooperative with the PIC and Registrar's Office. He has acknowledged his behaviour as unprofessional. He readily pled guilty to the charges and a hearing was not required. He has no prior discipline history.

Dr. Steffen's unprofessional behavior is very serious. The conduct did not just occur in a private setting but also in the clinical setting. The penalty should reflect the nature and gravity of the offence. The penalty should act as a deterrence and ensure public confidence in the profession.

The Registrar's Office acknowledges there are no similar discipline cases involving the striking of a child by a physician in either an outside or inside an office setting. There are cases of domestic assault on a spouse or partner. The Registrar's Office cites the *Nugent, Jha, Mortada* and *Dhanoa* decisions of the Ontario College. In the first three of those cases a suspension of 3 months was imposed and a 5-month suspension in the *Dhanoa* case for the assaults.

The Registrar's Office is asking for a reprimand, costs, any educational course Council may deem appropriate and a 3-to-5-month suspension.

Discussion

Council agreed with both sides that a reprimand, appropriate educational courses and costs were appropriate. Council also agreed that a suspension was necessary to demonstrate to the public and the membership that this behaviour is unprofessional and very egregious in its nature.

The *Camgoz v. College of Physicians and Surgeons, 1993 CanLII 8952* case outlines some of the factors that may be considered in imposing an appropriate penalty.

In this case the nature and gravity of the admitted conduct is a primary consideration. An assault on a child while attending a physician's office is self evidently a serious matter and would likely shock the public given that physician's first professional obligation is to do no harm.

Also, the assault took place in front of a medical student, put the medical student and the mother in a difficult spot. As well, the medical student, who reported the incident, was left with this decision to make.

This is not the only time that he had lost his temper and used physical force against a child, as seen in the assault against his stepson. While there was no evidence that either child suffered significant injury the mere fact of the assaults is serious.

Also, Dr. Steffen inappropriately self-prescribed and then misled the College about the extent of that activity, although he corrected the misrepresentation. Each of these are serious and strike at the heart of a physician's professional ethics and responsibility.

Council considered the physical assaults to be of the greatest concern. The dishonesty and self-prescribing can be addressed with an education or disciplinary approach but striking a child at home and particularly in an office setting is reprehensible behavior. Dr. Steffen and the profession must know that this behaviour will result in significant penalty and not just remediation. The family doctor's office should be a place of safety. Patients should be able to share freely and be treated with respect. Dr. Steffen has breached the public's trust in him and the profession. This is a significant departure from the expected ethical and honest behavior of a physician and the practice of medicine.

In terms of mitigating circumstances, Dr. Steffen accepted responsibility for these offences at an early opportunity, without the need for a hearing requiring witnesses to testify. Dr. Steffen has also provided additional information about his personal circumstances and has taken positive steps to address some of the issues raised by these charges. He has also had a criminal conviction registered against him for one of the assaults. On his own initiative he has completed a CMPA course on "Successful Patient Interactions". Dr. Steffen has demonstrated a willingness to learn from his mistakes. The Council is reassured by Dr. Steffen's psychotherapy and ongoing relationship with the Physician Health Program.

General deterrence is a consideration in this matter. The penalty imposed should reinforce for physicians the seriousness with which conduct of this nature will be seen by the College. Individual deterrence is also a factor. The seriousness of these matters also needs to be brought home to Dr. Steffen as a matter of individual deterrence, given there have been two incidents of his using force against a child.

Lastly, the need to maintain the public's confidence in the integrity of the College's ability to properly supervise the professional conduct of its members requires a clear message to the public about how this conduct will be viewed by members of the profession.

The cases presented by the Registrar's Office provide a range of 3 to 5 months for a single domestic assault. Dr. Steffen's conduct is of a more serious nature having involved children. Accordingly, Council is of the view that a 4-month suspension is warranted. In addition, Dr. Steffen is to receive a written reprimand. Dr. Steffen and the Registrar's Office agreed on the amount of costs, and it is ordered that Dr. Steffen pay costs of \$8853.55. The current Undertaking is to remain in place.

The value of educational courses is not lost on the Council. We, as a Council, must continually educate ourselves as times and expectations change. The same is expected of physicians. This is especially important to physicians who have lost their way and have ended up in front of the Council for disciplinary action. Council is of the opinion that additional courses will enhance Dr.

Steffen's personal strength, control and honesty. It is ordered that Dr. Steffen complete an anger management and ethics course acceptable to the Registrar.

**Approved by the Council of the College of Physicians & Surgeons of Saskatchewan:
24 January 2025**