

17 July 2026

Hon Simeon Brown

Minister of Health

Subject: The professional title for Physician Associates

Tēnā koe Minister

Te Whare Piki Ora o Māhutonga – Royal Australasian College of Surgeons (RACS) notes with concern your decision to use the title Physician Associate for the imminent regulation of this profession in Aotearoa New Zealand. We consider this title creates a risk to patients who may wrongly understand and trust they are being treated by a doctor.

RACS recognises fully your statutory responsibility for naming scopes of practice under the Health Practitioners Competence Assurance Act 2003. We request reconsideration of your decision.

The title Physician identifies one of the vocational scopes of practice for doctors regulated by Te Kaunihera Rata o Aotearoa – Medical Council of New Zealand (the Council). We know the word Physician leads to patients misunderstanding who is treating them. Using the name of another vocational scope is particularly confusing and the word Physician must be avoided. The word Associate is also confusing for patients and other health care professionals. One of the meanings of Associate is “a partner or companion in business or at work”, which implies a level of knowledge and skills similar to those of a doctor.

RACS suggests the title Clinical Assistant. Clinical Assistant would avoid confusion for patients and make it as clear as possible these practitioners are not physicians, nurses or doctors. At a minimum the title should include Assistant, not Associate. This would prioritise patient safety and understanding over the preferences of the small current Physician Associate workforce.

RACS recommends you reverse your decision and adopt the title Clinical Assistant before the Council begins registration of this healthcare profession in October 2026.

I would be happy to discuss this matter if you would find it helpful.

Dr Sharon English, FRACS

Chair, Aotearoa New Zealand National Committee

Te Whare Piki Ora o Māhutonga – Royal Australasian College of Surgeons

RACS is the leading advocate for surgical standards, professionalism and surgical education in Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia. We represent more than 8300 surgeons and 1300 surgical trainees and specialist international medical graduates (IMGs) across Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia. RACS is the accredited training provider in nine surgical specialties. Surgeons are also required by RACS and Te Kaunihera Rata o Aotearoa – the Medical Council of New Zealand to continue with surgical education and review of their practice throughout their surgical careers.

