



Women's Sexual and Reproductive Health Coalition

A consensus statement on Google's restriction of advertising sexual and reproductive healthcare services

Recommendations

- The SPHERE Coalition recommends Google explicitly allows the use of drug terms mirena, mifepristone and misoprostol for health information under the Health and Medicines policy
- The SPHERE Coalition recommends Google revises all policies that intentionally or unintentionally restrict advertising of critical sexual and reproductive healthcare services
- The SPHERE Coalition recommends Google implements a low and affordable limit to the cost of Google Advertising for Australian healthcare professionals who need to run Google Ads to provide sexual and reproductive health services to women in Australia
- The SPHERE Coalition recommends Google exempts Australian telehealth providers from mandatory certification with LegitScript

Summary

SPHERE is the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) Centre of Research Excellence in Women's Sexual and Reproductive Health in Primary Care, a collaborative research centre comprising national and international experts in sexual and reproductive health.

The Coalition is a cross-sectoral, multidisciplinary alliance comprising more than 200 clinician experts, consumers, representatives from peak bodies and key stakeholder organisations and eminent Australian and international researchers who have a shared vision for improving women's sexual and reproductive health.

In May 2024, Google published an update to their healthcare and medicines policy (1), requiring Australian telehealth providers to pay for certification with the United States-based company LegitScript (2). The LegitScript registration costs approximately



US\$4,729.94, plus an annual re-registration fee of US\$2,150. The intent of this policy is to safeguard people against illicit online pharmacies. Google **has** provided exemptions for registered pharmacies in Australia, but other registered health providers who have applied for a similar exemption have **not** been provided with one. The process for receiving an exemption is not transparent. Abortion services are not commonly available in the Australian public health sector. Therefore, Australian healthcare professionals who offer these services are forced to advertise on Google in order to reach their clients.

Upon review of this matter, it is evident that the mandatory certification for telehealth providers represents just one policy inhibiting abortion advertising. Google has employed a host of restrictive measures that censor advertising across sexual and reproductive health, and has done so well before the introduction of the LegitScript certification.

Layered censorship

The application of these policies seeks to regulate content that may be deemed inappropriate, harmful or illegal (3). However, abortion providers as well as family planning organisations providing critical information to the public, often get caught in this net. Health services information that appears to violate these policies is regularly censored or removed and campaigns are often flagged, resulting in an immediate account suspension. Examples of restrictive policies include [Abortion certification and disclosure](#), [Sexual content](#) and [Inappropriate content](#).

Censorship is evident across advertising related to STI testing, fertility, abortion and contraception. The promotion of health information that includes keywords such as 'abortion' or related phrases like 'unintended pregnancy' on an organisation's website, cannot run without financially costly certification.

Censorship and limitations are applied across display advertising (image, video or GIF-based advertisements shown to users on websites or applications) and performance max (a tool that increases conversions across Google's advertising channels including Search, Display, Discover, Maps, Gmail and YouTube). Google currently owns 94% of digital networks, meaning almost all online display advertising is owned by one company. Without an exemption, organisations cannot utilise one of the most prominent and prevalent forms of digital advertising.

In addition, abortion providers are unable to reference drug terms mirena, mifepristone and misoprostol on pages that contain health information for education. These terms [are all restricted](#) and have led to blanket ad bans for abortion providers, even when they are **not** used in ad text or landing pages. When Google issues blanket advertising bans to sexual and



reproductive health organisations, it limits access for women and pregnant people seeking healthcare. Drug terms are not being advertised, rather they are needed in order to provide clear information to the public regarding abortion procedures. Forcing abortion providers to remove any reference to these drug terms on their website does not align with Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) regulations, which [allow the use of non-promotional information](#). The SPHERE Coalition recommends that Google reflect TGA regulations and enable the use of drug terms, specifically in regards to abortion and contraception information.

Ignores existing regulations

The application of these policies contravenes existing advertising Australian regulations. Advertising is closely monitored by state and territory regulatory bodies and regulated by relevant authorities including the [Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency](#) (AHPRA) and the [Medical Board of Australia](#). Guidelines for advertising a regulated health service provide registered health practitioners with clear instructions on their obligations when advertising a service, and ensure the public receives accurate information (4). Additional certifications are thus unnecessary and financially costly to family planning organisations, and to other Australian providers who seek to provide services to their target audiences; people who need sexual and reproductive health services in Australia.

Conclusion

All women are entitled to make informed, autonomous decisions regarding their sexual and reproductive health. Access to abortion and contraception care is a fundamental human right that must be safe, affordable and available to everyone. Google's collection of advertising restrictions infringes upon this right and compromises women's access to the information they need. As the most popular search engine in the world, Google is in a unique position to support women's choices by making health services information accessible to everyone who needs it.

References

1. Google. Updates to Healthcare and Medicines Policy [Internet]. May 2024. Available from: <https://www.google.com/ad/policies/healthcare-medicines-policy>
2. LegitScript. About [Internet]. Available from: <https://www.legitscript.com/about/>
3. Google. Google Ads policies [Internet]. March 2025. Available from: [Google Ads policies](#).
4. Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency. Guidelines for advertising a regulated health service [Internet]. Available from: <https://www.ahpra.gov.au>