

Practice Note: House Inspections

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During the past few years there has been an increasing number of complaints before the Investigation Committee arising out of inspections and reports on the structural condition of single family houses. Some of these inspections have been pre-purchase related, while others have been to identify deficiencies and recommend remedial work.

In its desire for understandable and reliable reports, the public has become more interested in knowing the significance or the potential impact of various conditions which it has observed, or which have been noted by the engineer during an inspection. As an example, many lay people do not understand the difference between, or the significance of, a crack in a wall resulting from a structural stress or fault as opposed to a crack which is essentially cosmetic in nature.

It is important for a professional engineer who undertakes house inspections to determine in advance what the client expects from the inspection and report, and for the engineer to ensure, as far as possible, that the client clearly understands what services will be provided.

As the majority of engineers conduct their business with other professionals or business people, house inspections provide the professional engineer with a unique opportunity to interface with the public and demonstrate to it the value of the engineering profession to society. For many people, a house inspection is one of the few opportunities to communicate with an engineer about the professional's area of expertise.

The Investigation Committee recommends that each engineer engaged to undertake a house inspection take care to observe and act on the following suggestions. These suggestions have resulted from complaints that have been directed to the Committee in recent months. As you can see, these suggestions seem to be common sense and good courtesy. They are intended to assist the engineer to uphold and enhance the honour, integrity and dignity of the engineering profession.

- a. Communicate effectively with each client in a timely and effective manner during the course of any investigation and reporting, particularly if the matter relates to a civil action arising out of the construction of a residence.
- b. Exercise prudent and proper care and consideration to provide a standard of service that is at least that which can reasonably be expected of a prudent

engineer of average skill and ability in the areas of expertise required, particularly as it relates to foundations.

- c. Take care to explain to each client what engineering services are offered and the fees associated with each of the services.
- d. Treat each client with respect, respond to the client's questions as clearly and concisely as possible, and take care to explain the possible ramifications of abnormal conditions observed during an inspection.
- e. Determine the client's wishes by listening to the client's directions, by asking appropriate questions and by guiding the client responsibly, and then provide the services as agreed upon.
- f. Provide the agreed-upon services in a timely manner.
- g. If it is determined that more extensive work is necessary, after having agreed upon the services to be provided, and the fee for those services, notify the client of the conditions which have given rise to the more extensive work deemed necessary, together with a revised estimate of the fees, and obtain approval before proceeding to undertake the extra work and to bill extra fees.
- h. Prepare and retain adequate notes of the conditions observed during the inspection, particularly abnormal or suspicious conditions.
- i. Report the significant findings of the inspection fully, factually and concisely, and describe the extent of the inspection, indicating any limitations or restrictions which relate to the inspection, all in language that will be understood by the public. For example, state that the inspection is a visual inspection only and does not involve removing wall panels and/or insulation for a more detailed examination of the condition of such things as concrete foundations, electric wiring, water pipes, etc.