

GMC updates pandemic flu guidance

Embargoed until Monday 2 November 2009

The GMC has updated its guidance for doctors working in a pandemic.

Good Medical Practice, responsibilities of doctors in a national pandemic, is available on the GMC's website www.gmc-uk.org and outlines the standards of practice expected of doctors if their work is affected by a pandemic.

The guidance acknowledges that a pandemic can break out regionally and so while some doctors may be working normally, others may be struggling to cope with the additional workload. The guidance allows those most affected to work flexibly to provide assistance where it is most needed.

While key responsibilities such as acting with honesty and making patient safety a priority remain unchanged, the guidance recognises the constraints on time and resources likely in a pandemic. Adjustments include:

- an allowance for doctors to work outside their normal field of practice so long as they are able to do so safely, for example an orthopaedic surgeon may be asked to support A&E admissions or administer vaccines.
- no formal duty to report concerns about resources, equipment or insufficient patient services, other than in exceptional circumstances – because managers will already be aware of the pressures involved working in a pandemic.
- additional guidance on making decisions about which patients receive treatment where resources are scarce. Patient care prioritisation will be based on clinical need and on the patient's likely capacity to benefit. For example, young people should not be given automatic priority over adults.
- doctors running research programmes are asked to consider whether to interrupt them during a pandemic.

Jane O'Brien, GMC Head of Standards and Ethics, said:

"If services and resources come under real strain because of a pandemic, it is right that doctors should have some flexibility to ensure their efforts are directed towards treating patients and maintaining patient safety.

“Whilst the GMC expects doctors to provide a good standard of care, even in difficult circumstances, we do recognise that in a pandemic, some will have to make difficult decisions due to additional pressures. Should a complaint be made against a doctor working under the strain of a pandemic, the GMC will take into account the circumstances under which they were working. However, it is important to note that all doctors should be ready to explain how and why they altered their practice if called upon to do so.

“Exactly how doctors are deployed during a pandemic will be decided on a local level by primary care trusts but we hope that our amended guidance enables doctors to respond responsibly and reasonably to the circumstances they face.”

Anyone with questions about working as a doctor during a pandemic should visit the new GMC website: www.gmc-uk.org or call the GMC on 0161 923 6602.

ENDS

Notes to editors

Doctors must also follow guidance from UK Health Departments, the Royal Colleges and Specialty Associations.

Good Medical Practice, responsibilities of doctors in a national pandemic, was first made available in March 2009. It has since been amended to be consistent with the varying and regional impact of the pandemic on health services so far. The updated guidance is available online from 2 November 2009. It can be used immediately, if necessary, by doctors working under strain because of the pandemic. It no longer requires a UK alert level 3 to be announced before it is effective.

The GMC can grant temporary registration if the Secretary of State for Health advises us that an emergency has occurred, is occurring or may occur. The classes of person who will be granted temporary registration will reflect the circumstances and are likely to include, for example, doctors who have recently voluntarily relinquished their registration. No application will be necessary and no fee will be required. We strongly encourage doctors to respond positively if such an emergency arises, and offer their help locally where their own health and personal circumstances enable them to do so.

For further information please contact the Media Relations Office on 020 7189 5454, out of hours 020 7189 5444, fax 020 7189 5401, email press@gmc-uk.org, website <http://www.gmc-uk.org>.

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The law gives us four main functions:

- keeping up-to-date registers of qualified doctors
- fostering good medical practice
- promoting high standards of medical education
- dealing firmly and fairly with doctors whose fitness to practise is in doubt

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