Feedback on the code of conduct for students and fitness-to-practise procedures in schools of pharmacy

Damian Day, head of accreditation at the Royal Pharmaceutical Society, discusses some of the feedback received from the consultation.

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What did respondents say about our proposals? They said that they were clear, well presented and timely. A significant majority of respondents supported the proposals (over 80 per cent) and, of the remaining 20 per cent, 15 per cent raised comments about implementation rather than being against the proposals.

Three main themes emerged from the consultation. These were:

- The Society should provide support when the documents are implemented
- The code must be contextualised for students to help them understand what it means for them
- Academic staff interpreting the code and operating the fitness-to-practise procedures should be properly prepared to deal with problematic cases, especially those concerning health

The Society will endeavour to ensure that these points are addressed as the documents are implemented. Finally, as a result of the consultation and development process, the documents will be co-badged by both CUHOP and the British Pharmaceutical Students’ Association.


The consultation closed on 19 June 2009 and the Society’s Council has approved the documents in its July meeting, which will be published later this month. The consultation has generated a significant number of responses and some debate in the PJ. Some writers have been opposed to the proposals. Gordon Dykes, for example (PJ, 30 May 2009, p640) thinks that “university is a time to be reckless, radical, anti-authoritarian and daft”, and Barry Shooter (PJ, 6 June 2009, p672) thinks the Society should not “impose school-place pressure” on students. Cathal Gallagher (ibid, p670) suggests that engendering a more sophisticated understanding of health ethics would be a better approach (although neither document precludes this, in fact, it is quite the opposite).

Joy Wingfield (PJ, 13 June 2009, p703) provides some background to the proposals, explaining that what the Society is proposing is the norm rather than the exception and that the most important point is the way in which the change is implemented. The Society agrees and this is why students and universities will be properly supported throughout this process. Tim Mason (ibid) makes an important point: that students should not feel afraid to discuss confidential matters with personal tutors once the procedures are in force. Again, the Society agrees and this is why the personal tutor role is specifically mentioned in the procedures document as a source of independent support and advice. The fundamental question is whether pharmacy students behave in such a way that it is necessary to have these procedures in place?

Most pharmacy students are hard-working, of good character and reputable, and do not present schools of pharmacy with any problems in relation to their standards of conduct. In fact, one of the most enjoyable parts of an accreditation visit to a school of pharmacy is meeting its students. They are articulate, enthusiastic, aspiring young people who are a credit to their school and who will hopefully go on to be a credit to the profession.

As we all know, student life is about growing into independent adults and balancing study, possibly part-time work and, of course, a social life, with all the everyday complications that come with this. Some students spend Saturday in bed, some get drunk and some miss lectures. However, a small number of pharmacy students commit criminal offences. The types of offences committed are broad and range from relatively minor offences (eg, road traffic offences) to serious criminality.

Criminal offences

In the past few years, there have been examples of pharmacy students being convicted of serious sexual offences, grievous bodily harm, blackmail and theft. Although the numbers of such incidents is low, schools of pharmacy need to have procedures in place to deal with these issues properly, if and when they arise. The Society is not suggesting the procedures should act as a behavioural straitjacket, but they must be effective and proportionate.

An important question arises: should students who have committed serious criminal offences or misconduct be allowed to remain on an MPharm course?

The issue here is whether or not their behaviour is incompatible with working as a pharmacist and whether they will be prevented from entering preregistration training or working as a pharmacist. In these cases, it may be better to remove students from the MPharm and seek to counsel them to transfer to a different course — if that is possible. The fitness-to-practise procedures place a great emphasis on student support and counselling for this reason. Students need to be aware that, once an application is made to the Society for registration, the applicant is required to satisfy the Registrar that his or her fitness to practise is not impaired. All convictions, cautions and determinations by other regulatory bodies need to be disclosed at the application stage and, unless the applicant is, in the opinion of the Registrar, of good character and repute, registration is likely to be refused.

Rehabilitation Pharmacists are exempt from the provisions of the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974. This means that prospective pharmacists are expected to declare their convictions even if they are technically “spent”. Certain offences, for example convictions that have led to sentences of imprisonment for over two-and-a-half years, are never spent in any event, irrespective of what job or professional registration is applied for.

Disclosure of information

An important aspect of the new procedures is the proactive disclosure of information where this is lawful and in the public interest. We can all think of high profile instances of information not being disclosed in the public interest, with tragic consequences. Disclosure of information also needs to be proportionate and we have included the option of schools warning students about their conduct if they believe that this is an appropriate way of dealing with the matter. In such circumstances, this information may not necessarily be disclosed to the Society. In other words, if a student behaves inappropriately and out of character, a warning should be sufficient to remedy the situation and that should be an end to the matter.

Consultation responses

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