

To consider

Improving Engagement

Issue

1. Council is preparing to develop a new corporate strategy. When the corporate strategy has been agreed, a process will be required to create a communications strategy to support it.

Recommendations

2.
 - a. To endorse the current work on engagement and communications as an appropriate starting point for developing the communications strategy to support the new corporate strategy (paragraphs 10-15).
 - b. To approve the process for the development of a new communications strategy (paragraphs 16-19).

Further information

3. If you require further information about this paper, please contact us by email: gmc@gmc-uk.org or tel. 0161 923 6602

Background

4. A new corporate strategy will require the development of a communications strategy to support it.
5. The Communications Directorate was created in 2006, with the intention of achieving a more integrated and strategic approach to communications across the spectrum of our activities.
6. We have established offices in Belfast, Cardiff and Edinburgh to ensure that, as a UK-wide regulator, we are sensitive to the health systems in the four countries of the UK.
7. On 27 January 2009, Council identified engagement as an area requiring more targeted communications activity and endorsed the establishment of a Reference Community of around 25 public members and 25 doctors.
8. The Chair of Council identified as a particular priority the need to reach out to doctors, to listen to them and to ensure that our role in supporting professionalism through our standards-setting and education work is clearly understood.
9. On 4 June 2009, a group of Council members attended a workshop with Communications Directorate to review this and other activity. They endorsed the approach being taken as well as making a number of additional suggestions – in particular concerning the ambassadorial role of Council members. The group saw good communication as central to the work of the GMC. Their suggestions will be incorporated in current and future Communications Directorate work.

Discussion

10. The current wide-ranging programme of communications activity supports the key aims set out in the Business Plan.
11. The requirements of licensing and revalidation – major changes affecting every doctor on the register – have particularly highlighted the need for imaginative, varied and proactive communications.
12. As part of the current campaign for the introduction of licensing, the communications team will use a wide range of tools including: market research; consultation; media relations; direct marketing; advertising and web design. It has been necessary to deploy all of those in order to ensure that doctors understand they need to make a choice about licensing and feel confident that they have the right information available to do so. It will also be important to ensure that patients and the public understand the licence and how it fits in with revalidation.

13. We anticipate even greater challenges in communication about the introduction of revalidation – with its shared ownership between many different stakeholders. This has led to the establishment of a Revalidation Communications Forum to underpin the work of the UK Revalidation Programme Board. The forum, convened by the GMC, met for the first time in May and is now working on an integrated communications plan for the introduction of revalidation across the UK.

14. Council members' emphasis on improving and extending engagement activity is reflected in the operational work of the Communications Directorate. For example:

a. New Chair's meeting programme – Professor Rubin is undertaking a programme of introductory meetings with key interests. This will be followed by a programme of regular meetings across the UK in order to meet, discuss and listen to the views of individual doctors and patients.

b. Redevelopment of our website – a redesign of the site is due to be implemented by the end of September 2009. This is an increasingly important information source for doctors and employers as well as the public. In the first three months of 2009 we had over 700,000 visits to the website – a year on year increase of 12% with growth being particularly strong on our standards and ethics and education pages. The website will have a much more modern look and feel and be better able to incorporate growing degrees of interactivity, for example *Patients' help* and *GMP in Action*.

c. Redesign and re-launch of *GMCToday* – we are reviewing the design and content of *GMCToday* with a view to launching an improved magazine in the autumn. Every doctor on the register is entitled to receive *GMCToday*, which is an essential communications tool.

d. Doctor engagement pilots – we are keen for our devolved offices to pilot new approaches to engagement with doctors over the remainder of the year. The aim is to identify fresh approaches to connecting; to establish what is working well and to adopt the best of the techniques for use across the UK in 2010.

e. Student engagement – a new student engagement strategy has been agreed by the Undergraduate Board which will be implemented over the remainder of 2009. As the doctors of the future, it is essential that undergraduates and doctors in training engage early with the GMC, especially with our standards guidance.

f. Reference Community – the new Reference Community will be in place later this month. This will enhance our capacity to reach and listen to individual doctors and members of the public in the course of policy development – in addition to our regular engagement with representative bodies of the profession and patient groups.

g. Media – building on successful work on the licensing campaign, a project is underway to broaden the reach of our media coverage, with a particular focus on regional print and broadcast media in England.

h. Improving political understanding of the GMC – we are working closely with Standards and Fitness to Practise Directorate and Registration Directorate on using constituency casework to better inform the parliamentary audience of the work of the GMC.

i. Engagement toolkit – earlier in 2009 a GMC-wide consultation protocol was introduced and we improved our capacity to conduct online consultations. We have also begun to develop a comprehensive engagement toolkit providing examples of how to conduct effective engagement and encouraging best practice for use throughout the organisation.

j. Stakeholder conference – we are working with PMETB, who hold a successful annual national stakeholder conference, to explore the most effective means of building on this event following the merger of PMETB with the GMC.

15. Those activities are indicative of an open and proactive approach to communications which should include listening to, responding to and connecting with our principal interest groups, particularly in the process of policy development. They are the base from which we will work in developing the communications strategy to underpin and reflect the aims and priorities of the new corporate strategy.

Recommendation: To endorse the current work on engagement and communications as an appropriate starting point for developing the communications strategy to support the new corporate strategy.

Creating the communications strategy

16. Work on a new communications strategy will provide an opportunity to review our current communications activities to ensure that they continue to support our requirements effectively. It will also provide an opportunity to think more creatively and consider what resources are required to ensure we have effective communications to underpin and explain the new corporate strategy.

17. At the Communications brainstorm, members agreed that good communications practice requires that communications cannot be isolated from organisational aims; require a context that ensures consistency of approach; mirror the organisation; are prioritised and targeted but should not drive corporate principles or policy. They agreed that work on the communications strategy must support the aims and priorities that have been agreed as a framework for the corporate strategy.

18. Members will be meeting in July 2009 to begin the work on the corporate strategy. It will be important to ensure a read across from this process to both the communications strategy work and also our annual business planning, in order to ensure coherence. This will involve some time-tabling issues as the Business Plan needs to be ready for implementation at the start of 2010.

19. In order to maintain momentum, particularly with regard to engagement work, it will be necessary to prepare the communications strategy simultaneously with the drafting and sign off of the corporate strategy, so that it is ready to be rolled out by the end of 2009.

Recommendation: To approve the process for the development of a new communications strategy.

Resource implications

20. Development of a new communications strategy will not require additional resources in 2009.

Equality

21. In 2008, we undertook equality impact assessments of our publications, web and external relations activities. This year we plan to undertake further EIAs on our internal communications and media relations activities. The conclusions of those EIAs will be used as reference in the implementation of the communications strategy.