



Confidentiality: responding to criticism in the press

- 1 In our *Confidentiality* guidance, we advise that:
 - 6 Confidentiality is central to trust between doctors and patients. Without assurances about confidentiality, patients may be reluctant to seek medical attention or to give doctors the information they need in order to provide good care. But appropriate information sharing is essential to the efficient provision of safe, effective care, both for the individual patient and for the wider community of patients.
- 2 Doctors are sometimes criticised in the press by their patients¹ or by someone their patients have a close personal relationship with. The criticism can include inaccurate or misleading details of the doctor's diagnosis, treatment or behaviour.
- 3 Although this can be frustrating or distressing, it does not relieve you of your duty to respect your patient's confidentiality. Disclosures of patient information without consent can undermine the public's trust in the profession as well as your patient's trust in you. You must not put information you have learned in confidence about a patient in the public domain without that patient's express consent.
- 4 Disputes between patients and doctors conducted in the media often serve no practical purpose; they can prolong or intensify conflict and may undermine public confidence in the profession, even if they do not involve the disclosure of personal information without consent. You should usually limit your public response to press reports to an explanation of your legal and professional duty of confidentiality.
- 5 However, from time to time, press reports might cause patients to be concerned about your practice, or that of a health service you are associated with. In such cases it may be appropriate to give general information about your normal practice. You must be careful not to reveal personal information about a patient, or to give an account of their care, without their consent. If you deny allegations that appear in the press, you must be careful not to reveal, directly or by omission or inference, any more personal information about the patient than a simple denial demands.
- 6 You should seek advice from your professional or defence body, or from a solicitor, on how to respond to press criticism and, if appropriate, any legal redress available to you.

Endnotes

- 1 In this guidance, 'patient' is used to refer to both current and former patients.