

How we deal with complaints about your knowledge of English: information for doctors

All doctors working in the UK must have the necessary knowledge of English to provide a good standard of practice and care in the UK, according to our guidance *Good medical practice*.

If we receive a complaint about your knowledge of English, we may investigate and we may need to assess your English language skills. This factsheet explains how we assess your English language skills and decide if we need to restrict your registration to work as a doctor in the UK. Doctors should also seek independent legal advice.

How we investigate complaints about a doctor's language skills

If we are investigating concerns about your knowledge of English, we'll ask if there is any evidence you think may help us to assess your language skills. For example, you could provide details of other examinations you have taken, such as a recent primary medical qualification that has been taught and examined in English.

We may ask you to complete a language assessment. We will decide whether to do so based on guidance for decision makers on directing doctors to undertake a language assessment, which you can read at

www.gmc-uk.org/concerns/the_investigation_process/decision_makers.asp.

The language assessment we use is the academic version of the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) test.

How do I take the IELTS test?

You can take the test at **test centres** authorised by the British Council in the UK or overseas. Reasonable adjustments can be made for IELTS candidates with special requirements including hearing, visual or learning difficulties. You should contact the test centre in advance to discuss your specific needs. For more information about the test, please see the British Council website www.ielts.org/trf.

What is the pass mark?

There is no pass or fail mark for IELTS. The test has four parts – listening, reading, writing and speaking. You will receive individual scores of up to 9 for each of the four parts, and an overall score of up to 9 for all parts. We accept a score of at least 7 in each of the four parts, and an overall score of at least 7.5.

What if I have done the test before?

You may have done the test before – for example, when you applied for a place at medical school or when you joined the medical register. If so, you should let us know and give us a copy of your results. Depending on how recently you last did the test, we may still ask you to do it again. This is because your knowledge of English may have deteriorated over time. We must also take into account any concerns that have been raised.

Do I have to pay for the test?

You will need to pay the test centre upfront for the cost of the test; however we will reimburse you on receipt of proof of payment.

How many times can I take the test?

If you do not achieve the minimum scores we require for a satisfactory language assessment, you may wish to re-sit the test. You can take the IELTS test as many times as you wish, but we will only pay the cost once if we formally direct you to complete a language assessment. You may wish to undertake additional study before taking the test again.

If you decide to take the test again, please send us a copy of the results at the earliest opportunity. We may take this information into account as evidence of improved knowledge of English.

What if I do not take the test?

Once you are asked to complete a language assessment, you have 90 days to do so and send us the results. If you have not provided the test results by this deadline, you may be referred to a medical practitioner tribunal of the Medical Practitioners Tribunal Service (MPTS).

What if I'm unwell on the day of the test?

You can book another time to complete the test free of charge. You should provide a medical certificate to the IELTS organisation within five days. If you know or suspect that you have a health condition that may be the underlying cause of a deterioration in your

communication skills or knowledge of English, please let us know. In some circumstances where there are concerns about your health, we may need to handle your case differently. For more information about support for doctors with health concerns, please visit our *Your health matters* webpages at http://www.gmc-uk.org/concerns/doctors_health_concerns.asp.

What happens at the end of our investigation?

When you have completed the IELTS test, you should send us a copy of the results. Two senior members of our staff, called case examiners (one medical and one non-medical), will consider all the available evidence and decide how to deal with your case. They may decide to conclude the case with no further action, agree undertakings, or refer the case to an medical practitioners tribunal.

What happens if a tribunal finds me impaired due to language concerns?

The tribunal may place conditions on your registration or suspend your name from the medical register for a fixed period. The tribunal may also invite you to agree to undertakings. Your name cannot be permanently removed from the medical register where concerns relate solely to your knowledge of English and/or your health. However, if you fail to remediate over time, the tribunal can indefinitely suspend your registration.

Indefinite suspension

If your registration has been suspended without break for at least two years due to concerns about your knowledge of English and/or health and the tribunal is satisfied you are unlikely or unwilling to remediate, they may decide to suspend your registration indefinitely. If this happens, you must wait two years before you can request a review hearing. If a review hearing takes place, you may find it helpful to provide evidence of your improved knowledge of English.