
Case studies 1-7: Please note these are fictional case studies from the GMC's Patients' help web section, to help patients understand about the process for complaining about a doctor.

Case study 1 - Eileen, 69: A disagreement with a hospital doctor led to the doctor refusing to continue treatment.

“I went to hospital with a back complaint and was referred to Dr A at my local hospital.

“He began suggesting that I was being difficult, which I wasn't.

“Eventually he refused to go any further with the examination, and I had to leave without any treatment.

“I wrote to the GMC because I wanted the doctor to apologise.

“When the GMC got back to me they said they could not help me to get an apology, and that there were other avenues I should go down.

“I contacted the hospital and then got in touch with my local help and advice organisation. The support service were a great help in the end I did get an apology, which was all I wanted really.

“I ended up going round the houses to find what I needed. The GMC was the first name that sprang to mind for complaints about doctors – but it was the wrong avenue for me.

“The system is a bit of a maze for the general public so I would advise anyone who is thinking about making a complaint to contact their local help and advice centre in the first instance.

“Now I understand the GMC only looks at the most serious offences, and I also know how useful help and advice organisations can be, whatever the nature of your complaint about the health service.”

Note to remember

- The GMC can only take action in the most serious cases, and
- help and advice organisations are available to help you if you are not sure.

Case study 2 - Sarah, 35: A family was removed from a surgery's list following a series of disputes.

“We started to have problems with the surgery over collecting our prescriptions.

“They weren't being very flexible about when we could pick them up. We were both busy people with full-time jobs, and it was really awkward to get to the surgery at the times they were open.

“The staff at the surgery's reception were not very helpful. The next thing we knew, they had removed our family from the surgery list.

“We decided to approach the GMC. However, it became clear that this was an NHS issue as it wasn't about an individual doctor, but about a service provided by a GP practice.

“We took this up with the NHS and the issue was resolved – we ended up being transferred to a surgery which was slightly further away, but had more suitable opening hours.

“When you have a complaint you want it to be dealt with quickly, if we had known about who to complain to in the first instance, we would have saved time and effort and made the whole thing a little less stressful.”

Note to remember

- The GMC can only take action if your complaint raises issues that might bring doctor's 'fitness to practise' into question.
- To make sure your complaint goes to the right place it can be worth checking with your local help and advice service first.

Case study 3 - Mai, 42: A complaint after a problem with medical fees.

“I needed a private medical examination before I could take out an insurance policy.

“I knew I was going to have to pay for the test but the GP also did a blood test which – as far as I was concerned – was all part of the same examination.

“Then when the bill came, I found I had been charged separately for the medical examination and the blood test.

“I thought the GP was in the wrong for charging extra for the blood test so I reported the incident to the GMC.

“I found out the GMC don’t deal with complaints about medical fees. The NHS has its own rules for charging for private medical examinations, and any complaints need to be made via the NHS complaints process.

“I wasted some time by taking things up with the wrong organisation. If I have any issues I wish to complain about in the future I will be going straight to the local advice centre to get their advice first.”

Note to remember

- The GMC cannot deal with complaints about private medical fees.
- If you have any doubts about who to complain to, your local help and advice centre will be able to direct you.

Case study 4 - Andrew, 46, complained about a doctor’s comments in the medical report to an insurance company.

“I was driving along minding my own business when a truck pulled out of a side road. I did an emergency stop and the vehicle behind slammed into me, causing me severe whiplash and injuring my ankle.

”The pain was killing me – there was no way I could return to work. I’m a self employed plumber, so it cost me a lot of money not being able to work.

“But when the doctor examined me he said it wasn’t as bad as I was making out. He wrote up his findings in the Medical Report and passed that on to the insurance company. In the end I received next to nothing in compensation.

“I was fuming with this doctor, so I wrote to the GMC complaining that his report led to me losing my compensation.

“The GMC looked into it but it turned out they can only deal with a complaint about a medical report if the doctor hasn’t undertaken a proper examination or has made serious factual errors in the report.

“If it is shown that the doctor has acted professionally and in good faith then there is nothing they can do.

“I know that the doctor examined me, but I disagreed with his opinion of my condition.

“It was very frustrating for me at the time not knowing where to turn to with this – but I ended up going to my local help and advice organisation who provided the support I needed, after which I decided to seek legal advice.”

Note to remember

The GMC can only take action where there is a suggestion that a doctor acted unreasonably in preparing a report either by not putting themselves in a position to make a judgement or by reporting factually incorrect information.

Case study 5 - Keisha, 24: A doctor started Keisha on a trial drug without explaining the possible side effects.

“I had been suffering from a long standing condition which I won’t go into details on, but I had been using the same medication for quite a while.

“Dr G, a new consultant at the hospital, entered me onto a new course of treatment, which at first I thought was good news.

“However, one evening I was watching a TV programme and realised the drug I was on was a trial drug. I was astonished and angry.

“I went to Dr G who admitted it was true and said he didn’t tell me because he didn’t want to alarm me. I felt this was completely wrong and that I had been misled.

“I read the GMC advice on which organisations to contact, and felt it could be a GMC case, though I wasn’t sure. So I rang their helpline and they asked a few questions. They told me that I should make a complaint to them.

“They concluded the doctor had breached GMC guidance by failing to communicate the details of the trial and any possible side effects, and by not obtaining my consent before I underwent treatment.”

Note to remember

If you are unsure whether the GMC will be able to deal with your complaint, call our helpline 0161 923 6402.

Case study 6: Paul, 31, received bad medical advice on a website run by a doctor.

“When I found a rash on my back my first thought was to go online to get an idea of what might have caused it.

“I’m a wheelchair user and I don’t drive, so I find it easier to look on the internet first before making a trip to the doctor’s.

“Then I came across Dr H’s site, which looked really professional, and promised to not just tell me what caused it, but to cure it too.

“I provided some brief details about myself and what was wrong, and the doctor quite speedily prescribed some drugs which arrived in the post.

“I took them and they actually led to the rash getting worse and I was quite sick for several days. I did end up going to my GP to get my symptoms checked out and was told I should never have been prescribed them.

“I was really annoyed that Dr H had been making money from handing out prescriptions without taking the proper steps to examine me or take my medical history into account.

“I looked at the GMC website and thought that Dr H was endangering patients so I should probably refer the case to the GMC.

“I wasn’t sure so I called the GMC’s helpline. This was really worthwhile and I am glad I did so. They talked it through with me and I did end up referring Dr H to the GMC.”

Note to remember

Remember, if you think a case your concerns about a doctor might be something that the GMC should investigate, but you aren’t sure, you can check our website or call our helpline on 0161 923 6402.“

Rajesh, 53, was in dispute with a neighbour, who is a doctor.

“My neighbour and I have always got on ok but he infuriated me when I came back from holiday and discovered he had erected a new fence between his property and my own.

“He was blatantly flouting the planning laws and parts of the fence were on my land. I went round his house to discuss the matter but he wasn’t interested. He swore at me and told me to take it up with my solicitor.

“I had heard about the GMC because I read the papers, so I reported him to the GMC. I didn’t think that a doctor should be behaving in this way, and that he was effectively bringing the profession into disrepute.

“The GMC was not able to take the complaint forward. They explained that private disputes with doctors are unlikely to be a matter the GMC would investigate, if the dispute did not reflect on the doctor’s professional abilities.

“If I had taken my grievance up with a help and advice organisation, they could have told me whether complaining to his surgery, or the GMC, or perhaps even the local council, was the best way forward.”

Note to remember

- if you have a private dispute with someone who is a doctor, and this has no bearing on the doctor’s professional abilities, the GMC is unlikely to investigate.
- Help and advice organisations can provide guidance.