

Confidentiality: responding to criticism in the media



Summary

This guidance looks at how to respond if you are criticised publicly, particularly if the report is inaccurate or unfair. If you do not have a patient's explicit consent, it suggests what you may be able to say without putting confidential information in the public domain. It applies to social media as well as print and broadcast

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Professional standards: More detailed guidance

This guidance came into effect 25 April 2017.

This guidance was last updated on 13 December 2024.

You can find the latest version of all our professional standards at www.gmc-uk.org/guidance.

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However tempting it may be to respond if you are criticised publicly, particularly if the report is inaccurate or unfair, you mustn't put confidential information in the public domain without your patient's explicit consent.

This guidance looks at the principles behind this, and suggests what you may be able to say, even if you can't disclose the details. It applies to social media as well as print and broadcast.]]

1. In our guidance *Confidentiality: good practice in handling patient information* we say:
 1. Trust is an essential part of the relationship between patients and medical professionals and confidentiality is central to this. Patients may avoid seeking medical help, or may under-report symptoms, if they think that their personal information will be disclosed without consent, or without the chance to have some control over the timing or amount of information shared.

About this guidance

2. Doctors, physician associates and anaesthesia associates (collectively referred to as 'medical professionals') are sometimes criticised in print or broadcast media or on social media¹ by their patients² or by someone who is close to, or who represents, a patient. The criticism can include inaccurate or misleading details of the medical professional'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. This guidance, which forms part of the professional standards, sets out how the general principles in our guidance *Confidentiality* apply when medical professionals are considering how to respond to criticism in the media.

The standards of good practice apply to doctors, physician associates and anaesthesia associates (collectively referred to as medical professionals and whom we address directly as 'you' throughout the guidance). As with all our professional standards, this guidance applies to all our registrants to the extent it is relevant to the individual's practice.

The professional standards describe good practice, and not every departure from them will be considered serious. You must use your professional judgement to apply the standards to your day-to-day practice. If you do this, act in good faith and in the interests of patients, you will be able to explain and justify your decisions and actions. We say more about professional judgement, and how the professional standards relate to our fitness to practise processes, appraisal and revalidation, at the beginning of *Good medical practice*.

Responding to criticism

4. Disclosures of patient information without consent can undermine the public's trust in the professions as well as your patient's trust in you. Disputes between patients and medical professionals conducted in public can also 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.
5. You must not put information you have learned in confidence about a patient in the public domain without that patient's explicit consent. You should usually limit your public response to an explanation of your legal and professional duty of confidentiality.
6. However, from time to time, media reports or social media discussions 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 public media, 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.
7. You should seek advice from your professional or defence body, or from a solicitor, on how to respond to criticism in the media and, if appropriate, any legal redress available to you.

Endnotes

1. See also our guidance [Using social media as a medical professional](#). You can find all of our [guidance online](#).
2. In this guidance, 'patient' refers to both current and former patients.

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You are welcome to contact us in Welsh. We will respond in Welsh, without this causing additional delay.

Mae croeso i chi gysylltu â ni yn Gymraeg. Byddwn yn ymateb yn Gymraeg, heb i hyn achosi oedi ychwanegol.

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