

Honesty and trust – implications of signatures

A case study from Manchester Medical School by Prof Alexander Woywodt, Dr Louise Foreman, Dr Fatimah Soydemir and Prof Madhavi Paladugu

It is common practice that students sign a register for teaching sessions so the medical school knows who has attended. At Manchester, we ask students to write down their student ID number and sign the attendance sheet.

On the last day of term before the Christmas break, a member of the team noticed that ten signatures looked different from previous entries. We decided to investigate so spoke to each of the students individually.

Eight students stated that they'd actually been in the room but that someone else had signed in for them for convenience, and because the queue for the attendance register had been too long. Two students admitted that they weren't there but were adamant that they didn't know who had signed in for them. Most students were very apologetic, although two students initially felt it was all 'ridiculous'.

In *Achieving good medical practice*, the GMC lists falsifying signatures on documents such as portfolios as a key area of concern regarding professionalism. We were keen to strike a reasonable and fair balance between our intention to enforce professional behaviour, and our aim to avoid stigmatising the students. We also wanted the students to reflect and learn from the experience for their future careers.

Previous work suggests that undergraduates' attitudes towards forging signatures can be somewhat ambivalent. In a 2001 study in Dundee 93% of undergraduates felt that forging signatures was wrong, although 9% admitted they had done it themselves at some stage (Rennie & Crosby, 2001).

We asked all of the students to write a 1,500 word reflective piece on the topic 'Honesty and trust – implications of signatures'. We also considered possible sanctions, and agreed that we would only impose further sanctions if students lacked insight and reflection.

We were genuinely surprised by many of the reflective pieces. All students showed insight and accepted that their behaviour had been wrong. They also raised new, interesting considerations and suggested that the role of signatures in society is changing. Some students stated that they had only written a fellow student's name (who was actually in the room) on the register and had not intended to *sign* a document.

Social changes and the signature

We were struck by this reflection on the changing role of signatures in society overall. We don't intend to excuse or condone the students' behaviour, but we have to admit that handwritten signatures are much less used nowadays and have often morphed into a scribble on a touch screen. Even less common is the requirement for a signature that is compared with a template for authenticity – this is often reserved for transfer of property, land or large sums of money. This development has not spared medicine and many clinic letters are now signed remotely and electronically.

We need to accept that our current undergraduates' lives are largely based on a digital persona, with digital signatures or biometrics that are much better fraud prevention measures. The declining use of handwritten signatures has received considerable attention in the corporate world, with some authors regarding the physical signature as an increasingly worthless and outdated tool for authenticating people's identities (Wolff, 2016).

In the incident described here we felt reassured by the fact that after some time to reflect, all students showed insight, both when interviewed and in writing, and no further sanctions were required. We did decide to change our registration approach - now a member of the team takes a departmental iPad to the lecture room, signs the students in electronically, and also compares their appearance against student photos on the database.

This case raises interesting and important issues regarding signatures. In light of the declining use of handwritten signatures overall, should we perhaps move toward digital forms of authentication? At the very least, institutions who rely on handwritten signatures should perhaps reflect on this topic and ensure their policy is clear to staff and students.

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