

04 March 2025

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Jeanette Dickson

Chair, Academy of Medical Royal Colleges

Dear Jeanette

For action: learning from the marking error in diet 3 of the 2023 MRCP Part 2 written examination

We're writing to you following the announcement from the Federation of the Royal Colleges of Physicians of the UK (the Federation) about a marking error with diet 3 of the September 2023 MRCP part 2 written examination.

You will be fully aware of the effect this mistake has had on the doctors impacted. It is devastating and will have taken a significant emotional, mental, and financial toll. All those affected must have the tailored support they need for as long as it takes to resolve this issue. We will continue to seek assurances from you, the Federation, the four UK statutory education bodies, employers, postgraduate deans, and responsible officers in the coming weeks to make sure this happens.

We have asked the Federation to provide a full report that explains what led to the marking error and the immediate improvements it will make to ensure this does not happen again. We have asked for regular updates from the Federation against their proposed actions including how they are involving the Academy in this work.

Learning from errors

I am sure you will agree that there is an opportunity for all medical royal colleges to learn from this incident. Other royal colleges have made errors in the delivery of postgraduate exams before, which has resulted in personal distress to doctors, disruption to their training, and potential patient safety issues.

As the regulator, we must have confidence in the ability of colleges to deliver these examinations competently. This is central to maintaining patient safety and ensures that both doctors and the public are confident that the decisions made about assessments are of a high standard.

When mistakes happen, we are often asked to approve a post hoc change to the methodology that is used to determine the pass/fail threshold to reduce the impact on candidates. It is not for the GMC to decide the pass/fail threshold for an exam.

As much as we want the doctors affected by the errors that organisations have made to be properly supported, the standards that lead to pass/fail decisions are in place to assure patient safety. It's not appropriate, nor fair to other doctors who have passed or previously failed the exam, to change the outcome because of administrative errors.

The rules about recruitment into higher specialty training are agreed by the Medical and Dental Recruitment and Selection committees on behalf of the four statutory education bodies of the UK. We are clear that we expect the process to meet our standards. We also expect all decisions to be fair, and support and guidance should be provided to any individuals adversely affected.

The role of the royal colleges in maintaining standards

[Excellence by design](#) sets out the standards for the design and development of postgraduate curricula and assessment we expect all those who deliver postgraduate examinations to meet. The approval we grant medical royal colleges and faculties to award qualifications is reliant on them maintaining these standards. In turn, this provides us, and by extension patients and the public, with confidence that doctors have the appropriate skills and training to deliver high-quality care.

We have no role in the delivery of assessments or quality assuring the marks provided. That is the sole responsibility of the medical royal colleges and faculties across the UK as the awarding bodies of the relevant qualifications. When adverse events impact the delivery of an examination, we ask to be informed. We then seek assurance that our standards continue to be met, that candidates are supported, and that any impact on the wider healthcare system and progression of doctors is managed safely and effectively.

We now have wider concerns about whether our standards for quality management are being maintained. We are reflecting on whether formalising assessment delivery standards for postgraduate examinations is now required. We will consider if this is needed as part of our programme on the future of education and career development.

Our ask of you and the wider college community

Our project on the future of education and career development is a long-term programme of work, and more immediate steps must be taken. We would like to understand how the Academy will collate the lessons learnt from this incident and from previous delivery issues within the wider college community. We'd also like to know how these lessons learnt will be disseminated amongst the medical royal colleges so they can all make sure a similar incident doesn't happen in the future.

We also think it would be beneficial for the Academy Assessment Committee, of which we are a member, to produce best practice principles around examinations. And we ask that consideration is given to establishing a short-life working group to address the issues affecting all colleges.

We'd be happy to arrange to meet with you and members of your team to discuss how we can take this work forward. Action must be taken by those accountable to make sure candidates are not put in this position again.

We will be in touch soon to discuss a timeline for the actions above. In the meantime, please do not hesitate to get in touch should you wish to discuss any aspect of this letter.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Colin Melville', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Professor Colin Melville

Medical Director and Director, Education and Standards