Perceptions of good medical practice in the NHS: a survey of senior health professionals

Allen Hutchinson, Melanie Williams, Keith Meadows, Rosaline S Barbour, Roy Jones

Abstract
Objectives—To categorise senior health professionals’ experience with poor medical practice in hospitals and in general practice, to describe perceptions which senior NHS staff have of good medical practice, and to describe how problems of poor medical practice are currently managed.

Design—A postal questionnaire survey. The questionnaire sought perceptions of good medical practice, asked participants to characterise deviations from good practice, and to describe experience with managing poor performance at the time of the introduction of the General Medical Council (GMC) performance procedures.

Setting—A range of NHS settings in the UK: hospital trusts, health authorities/boards, local medical committees, community health councils.

Subjects—Senior health professionals involved in the management of medical professional performance.

Main measures—Perceptions of what constitutes good medical practice.

Results—Most respondents considered that persistent problems related to clinical practice (diagnosis, management, and outcome and prescribing) would require local management and, possibly, referral to the GMC performance procedures. Informal mechanisms, including informal discussion, education, training, and work shifting, were the most usual means of handling a doctor whose performance was poor. Many took a less serious view of deficiencies in performance on manner and attitude and communication, although consultation skills rather than technical skills comprised the greatest number of complaints about doctors.

Conclusions—Senior NHS professionals seem reluctant to consider persistently poor consultation skills in the same critical light as they do persistently poor technical practice. These attitudes may need to change with the implementation of clinical governance and updated guidance from the GMC on what constitutes good medical practice. (Quality in Health Care 1999; 8:213–218)

Keywords: quality improvement; medical practice; poor performance
The General Medical Council’s role in self regulation

The General Medical Council (GMC) is the UK institution responsible for the registration and regulation of doctors. During recent years it has issued increasingly explicit advice on the nature of good clinical practice, recently updated through *Maintaining Good Medical Practice* and a further revision of *Good Medical Practice* publications which are sent to all UK doctors on the GMC register. Doctors are expected to adhere to this guidance, which sets out clear good medical practice criteria for all important aspects of care, together with advice on the management of poor performance and the duties of a doctor when faced with a case of poor performance (box 2).

**Box 2** Guidance for good medical practice (taken from *Good Medical Practice*)

- Poor attitude and disruptive behaviour
- Doubts about clinical judgment and competence
- Ill health
- Extreme workaholic tendencies
- Difficulty with personal behaviour and lifestyle
- Poses a specific health hazard
- Stress
- Lack of commitment to duties
- Dishonesty
- Disorganised practice
- Poor communication

Alongside the guidance are the GMC performance procedures, introduced in July 1997 following the enabling legislation by parliament in 1995.10 The procedures provide the means for the GMC to assess the performance of a doctor whose practice is considered to be poor. Restrictions on registration may be placed on the doctor after a series of steps involving a knowledge based test together with a specialty specific assessment of clinical skills (box 3).

**Stage 1: screening**
- The GMC receives a complaint about professional performance and undertakes initial assessment
- If there is possible serious deficiency the doctor passes on to stage 2

**Stage 2: assessment of performance**
- Doctor agrees to, or is required to, undergo assessment
- If performance is judged deficient through assessment, the doctor passes to stage 3 and/or stage 4

**Stage 3: remedial action and reassessment**
- If deficiencies are remediable, the doctor takes remedial action and undergoes reassessment
- Available options for action include suspension of registration

**Stage 4: committee on professional performance**
- Committee considers cases of doctors who refuse to cooperate or whose performance fails to improve or is sufficiently deficient to be dangerous
- Available options for action include suspension of registration

The context in which the performance procedures were introduced is fast changing. Within a few months of the formal start of the procedures, quasiregulatory systems and management arrangements in the NHS were introduced by the government, partly in response to concerns over various tragedies related to unacceptable variations in clinical practice (for instance the high mortality rate after complex paediatric cardiothoracic surgery which has resulted in a public enquiry3). Now, through the concept of clinical governance, NHS chief executives of hospital trusts (and their boards and senior clinical staff) will be responsible to parliament for the quality of care in hospital.12 Additionally, there will be an assessment framework for comparing the performance of health authorities13 and hospital trusts, the introduction of mandatory clinical audit for hospital doctors, publicly available healthcare outcome results for named hospitals, and, in the future, named hospital doctor clinical audit data will be made available to doctors from the Commission for Health Improvement.14 This adds weight to the suggestion that the environment of British medical practice has "changed utterly",15 and that there may be significant threats to the self regulation of the medical profession as a result of high profile practice failures and changes in perceptions of the role of doctors, at least in so far as policy...
makers are concerned. It is in this context of concern over clinical standards that the study reported here was undertaken, during the months after the introduction of the GMC performance procedures in July 1997.17

Objectives
The study sets out to categorise senior health professionals’ experience with poor medical practice in hospitals and in general practice, to describe perceptions which senior NHS staff have of good medical practice, and to describe how problems of poor medical practice are currently managed. It forms part of a series of studies sponsored by the GMC and designed to evaluate the introduction of the GMC’s performance procedures, including also an evaluation of the fairness of the internal processes of performance procedures, including also an evaluation of the fairness of the internal processes of the procedures and a study of the beliefs and understanding of a national sample of doctors about good medical practice.

Methods
In November 1997 a postal survey was undertaken of senior NHS doctors and managers who were likely to have a role in the management of doctors whose performance might be considered poor. At the time of the survey these were in:

- Health authorities/boards: the statutory NHS bodies responsible for improving the health of the nation. Directors of public health, general practice medical advisors, and senior complaints managers had responsibility for managing poor performance of general practitioners (GPs)
- Local medical committees: the statutory representative body for GPs, who are independent contractors to the NHS. Medical

Table 1 Number of respondents who had used specific informal mechanisms to handle a poorly performing doctor in the previous two years. Ranked by order of frequency (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Health authority; n=134</th>
<th>Trust; n=182</th>
<th>Local medical committee; n=73</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Informal discussion</td>
<td>Informal discussion</td>
<td>Informal: local medical committee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>119 (89)</td>
<td>167 (90)</td>
<td>60 (82)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Informal: local medical committee</td>
<td>93 (51)</td>
<td>57 (78)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Additional education</td>
<td>Work shifting</td>
<td>Work shifting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 (74)</td>
<td>89 (49)</td>
<td>30 (41)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Work shifting</td>
<td>3 wise men</td>
<td>3 wise men</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>58 (43)</td>
<td>46 (25)</td>
<td>23 (32)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 “Three wise men”</td>
<td>Diverting patients</td>
<td>Additional education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43 (32)</td>
<td>33 (18)</td>
<td>17 (23)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 Number of respondents who encountered specific performance problems in the previous two years in general practice and hospital practice, ranked by frequency of experience of problem (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>General practice</th>
<th>Hospital practice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Health authority; n=134</td>
<td>Community health council; n=67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manner and attitude</td>
<td>Manner and attitude</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>119 (89)</td>
<td>63 (94)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>Communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>110 (82)</td>
<td>63 (94)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Management and outcome</td>
<td>Management and outcome</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>98 (73)</td>
<td>48 (66)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>96 (72)</td>
<td>52 (78)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diagnosis</td>
<td>Prescribing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>92 (69)</td>
<td>47 (70)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Definition of poor performance: based on types of poor performance identified in the research literature, what was the perception of the importance of differing types of persistent errors in clinical practice?

Experience of use of, or preparation for, the procedures: an early attempt to identify the local responses to the implementation of the performance procedures.

The same questionnaire was sent to all respondents, who were asked to comment, where their experience allowed, on practice across the whole spectrum of the NHS, both general practice and hospital practice. In some cases it was only possible for respondents to comment on one of these two areas of practice, and the analysis takes account of these responses.

Addresses for the questionnaires were available for all of the institutions from public documents or, in the case of local medical committee secretaries, by permission of the British Medical Association. A total of 949 questionnaires were sent to 104 local medical committee secretaries, 127 community health council chief officers, 102 health authorities (a questionnaire each to directors of public health, GP medical advisers, and complaints managers, 306 in total), and 206 trusts (medical directors and complaints managers, 412 in total). Reminders were sent to non-responders after three weeks.

Results were postcoded, entered onto an Excel database, and analysed using SPSS.

More than one respondent was chosen in trusts and health authorities because it was uncertain who might have lead responsibility for handling poor medical performance and because it enabled access to various different perspectives on the problem. Usually, the addressee returned the questionnaire. In many cases, however, institutions made one return as a matter of policy. The analysis was able to identify which type of staff returned questionnaires and sufficient information from different types of staff was available for subgroup analysis.

The overall response rate of institutions was 68%. Analysed by institution type, 57% of trust respondents, 76% of community health council respondents, and 60% of the health authority respondents were responses from more than one type of specialties and general practice. Although there were responses from more than one type of health professional in health authorities/boards and in trusts, there were no significant differences between results from different types of respondent within institution type. Results are therefore displayed by institution type.

The overall response rate of institutions was 68%. Analysed by institution that gave at least one response, the response rate was: health authorities/boards 75%, trusts 69%, local medical committees 71%, community health councils 56%.

In each main section of the study, results are displayed from the four types of institution because they each have different aspects of poor performance as their priority and may therefore be expected to have experience and opinions of poor medical practice.

AWARENESS OF THE PERFORMANCE PROCEDURES

All of the respondents had heard of the performance procedures, the principal source of information being the GMC itself.

EXPERIENCE OF HANDLING POORLY PERFORMING DOCTORS

Respondents were asked whether they had used any informal mechanisms listed in box 3 to handle a poorly performing doctor over the previous two years.

Informal mechanisms

Table 1 indicates that an informal discussion was of the most frequently used informal mechanisms with 82% of local medical committee respondents, 90% of trust respondents, and 89% of health authority respondents using it on at least one occasion in the previous two years. Providing additional education and training was also a frequently used informal mechanism, as was work shifting (a mechanism which involves relieving the poorly performing doctor of some patients/clinical duties). The remaining mechanisms, for example assigning easier cases or exporting the problem, were used less frequently. Only 15% of health authority and 18% of trust respondents had assigned easier cases to a poorly performing doctor.

Formal mechanisms

Respondents were asked about the formal mechanisms they used to handle poor performance, with 67% of health authority respondents, 57% of trust respondents, 76% of community health council respondents, and 58% of local medical committee respondents having used the existing NHS complaints procedure on at least one occasion in the previous two years. Existing disciplinary procedures had been used slightly less frequently, with almost half of the trusts, community health councils, and local medical committees, and 60% of the health authority respondents using them on at least one occasion. Fifty five per cent of health authorities, 43% of community health councils, 40% of local medical committees, and 19% of trusts had referred to the GMC health procedures or to conduct procedures on at least one occasion in the previous two years.

TYPES OF PERFORMANCE PROBLEMS ENCOUNTERED

Respondents were asked whether they had encountered specific types of performance problems in the previous two years. The most frequently encountered performance problems were related to consultation skills (table 2). Health authority respondents answered this question less frequently about hospital practice because the problem of poor performance is usually a matter for the trust.

Perceptions of poor performance

Respondents were asked whether, in their opinion, a consistent and serious error in any...
one of five areas of clinical practice would constitute poor performance (table 3). Almost all respondents stated Definitely yes or Yes when considering prescribing, diagnosis, and outcome. Respondents were less certain, however, about clearly defining consultation skills of manner and attitude and communication as poor performance despite stating that these are the most frequently encountered performance problems (table 2).

Management of doctors with serious and consistent errors of performance

Respondents were asked:

- Should a consistent and serious error in any one of (several) areas trigger a local investigation?
- If that local investigation fails to resolve poor performance, should referral under the GMC performance procedures be considered?

Results showed a similar pattern to those from the perceptions of poor performance questions about the relative importance attached to specific areas of practice. For example, respondents in 51% of health authorities and 47% of trusts said Probably yes to considering whether to trigger a local investigation for Manner and attitude whereas respondents in 80% of health authorities and 83% of trusts said Definitely yes when considering Clinical management and outcome. In the case of referring unresolved performance problems to the GMC, a similar pattern emerged. Respondents showed more reservations about referring serious and consistent errors in relation to the consultation skills of manner and attitude and of communication than about referring poor technical skills.

Discussion

These results form an important baseline for what is perceived to be good medical practice by senior staff in the NHS, against which it will be possible to assess changes in the local handling of poorly performing doctors. In particular the results show that there is a difference in the perceptions of what constitutes poor practice between consultation skills and what might be termed technical skills, even though problems with consultation skills are far more frequently encountered by the study respondents.

Two of the 14 criteria on good medical practice published by the GMC are particularly pertinent here (box 2). Doctors are required to “listen to patients and respect their views” and to “give patients information in a way they can understand”. Despite this clear guidance there still seems to be a reluctance to consider doctors as performing poorly if they persistently fail to meet these criteria.

On the basis of this study, mechanisms for the current handling of poorly performing doctors seem rather fragile. Exporting problems or work shifting to colleagues, rather than managing the problem explicitly, may not be in the best interests of patients, employing organisations, or the doctor concerned. It may be that informal mechanisms are in many cases the most appropriate method of handling the poorly performing doctor, but at the very least these mechanisms require a means of ensuring appropriate outcomes. Although the study found that doctors and managers from all parts of the NHS were well informed about the performance procedures it did not follow that appropriate mechanisms were in place to deal with those cases where there are serious concerns over performance. Although no data have been gathered on the outcomes of the informal and formal methods used by respondents to manage poor performance, it is unlikely that these outcomes will be other than those reported by the contributors to the work of Lens and van der Wal, nor different from that which led to the introduction of the performance procedures.

Nevertheless, it is apparent from the results that most of the respondents ascribed to high standards and expectations of technical competence. The sense of frustration in not being able to deal adequately with the types of performance problems so graphically described in Rosenthal’s work, may be exacerbated by these high professional standards.

Variation from the norms of good medical practice and persistently poor practice are a concern to local clinicians and managers as well as to regulators and policy makers. When this study was undertaken there was relatively little evidence of preparation by institutions to ensure that they would use the performance procedures effectively or to put in place mechanisms for early diagnosis and more effective management of poor performance. However, data were collected up to six months before the policy and practice changes arising from the recently highly publicised “Bristol case” (in which three doctors had restrictions to practice placed on them for failures in the standards of good practice), recent guidance from the GMC, and the NHS quality initiative.

Responses to these influences may have accelerated change. After the introduction of the performance procedures, Rotherham and colleagues produced advice for local managers in health authorities in the case of GPs whose performance gave cause for concern. Many local clinical governance committees are attempting to determine how they should handle poor performance within their brief of quality improvement and risk reduction.

But it should be recognised that the dissonance among professionals in the perception of what constitutes poor performance of a doctor in consultation, in contrast with the more technical aspects of care, is a challenge to patient care and perhaps, ultimately, to medical professional self regulation. Changes in societal attitudes to doctors who are rude or unhelpful are likely to mean that, in the future, failures of consultation skills are as likely as failures in technical skills to bring a doctor to the attention of local NHS management, and will require clearer mechanisms for handling poor performance. For this situation to be improved, a more positive approach to acknowledging the rights of patients will be required, particularly at all levels of education and training in medical schools and in the NHS.

The information from this study will now be used in a second investigation which will examine the mechanisms for handling poorly
performing doctors in the NHS and the use of referral to the GMC performance procedures in those cases where local handling is deemed to have failed.

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Allen Hutchinson is a member of the GMC performance procedures evaluation group which commissioned the research project.

Copies of the questionnaire are available from the School of Health and Related Research, University of Sheffield, Regent Court, 30 Regent Street, Sheffield S1 4DA (tel: 0114 222 0811).

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