

Confidentiality: responding to criticism in the media

- 1 In our guidance *Confidentiality: good practice in handling patient information* we say:
 - 1 Trust is an essential part of the doctor-patient relationship 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 by doctors without consent, or without the chance to have some control over the timing or amount of information shared.

About this guidance

- 2 Doctors 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 doctor'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 explanatory guidance sets out how the general principles in our guidance *Confidentiality* apply when doctors are considering how to respond to criticism in the media.

Responding to criticism

- 4 Disclosures of patient information without consent can undermine the public's trust in the profession as well as your patient's trust in you. Disputes between patients and doctors 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 *Doctors' use of social media*. You can find all of our guidance online at www.gmc-uk.org/guidance.
- 2 In this guidance, 'patient' refers to both current and former patients.