

Managing Students in Difficulty In Dumfries and Galloway

Introduction

- The spectrum of performance problems is wide and ranges from minor, momentary aberrations of behaviour, to major misdemeanours, persistent unprofessional behaviours or even acts of gross criminality.
- Periods of transition (changing jobs, moving regions, countries/cultures, personal life events etc) can be associated with a deterioration of clinical performance which may require additional vigilance and support.
- Serious performance issues amongst students are rare. This infrequency, together with the student's perceived lack of expertise and the increasing requirement for robust evidence, heightens anxiety and concerns amongst those who may have to deal with such matters when they do occur.

Remember that there are often many dimensions to the problem.

- A significant number of students come from other countries, cultures and religions where healthcare systems and social/cultural norms are sometimes quite different. This complexity may introduce conflicting tensions and make effective management all the more challenging.
- Confounding elements include legal aspects such as health and safety, employment, race, sexual and gender discrimination legislation. There may also be moral, ethical or confidentiality considerations.
- HR factors such as bullying and harassment, litigation, industrial tribunals, conflict management, the need for mediation and reconciliation.
- Challenge of effective difficult conversations. Communication can be challenging in both verbal & written form, and formal & informal contexts.

Take advice and seek support. Do not try to deal with complex scenarios on your own!

- Escalate and engage local and regional resources at your disposal in a proportionate manner. Effective and fair management of students in difficulty requires an objective assessment of the circumstances.
- It is important to involve an experienced colleague early to assist in identifying and exploring underlying factors and to help set clear goals for improvement.

- Remember early and proportionate intervention may prevent problems becoming intractable. Early intervention is essential if adverse consequences are to be avoided.

Early identification of problems and intervention is essential.

It is the responsibility of any doctor to highlight any concerns to the student's Educational Supervisor. Useful early warning signs may include:

- **The invisible student:** not answering bleeps; disappearing; lateness; frequent sick leave.
- **Career problems:** difficulty with exams; uncertainty about career choice; disillusionment with medicine.
- **Insight failure:** rejection of constructive criticism; defensiveness; counter-challenge.
- **Lack of engagement in educational processes:** fails to arrange meetings with educational supervisors, reluctant to complete portfolio cases, little reflection
- **Lack of initiative/appropriate professional engagement:** the trainee may come from a culture where there is a rigid hierarchical structure to medical training and trainees are not encouraged to demonstrate any healthy assertive behaviours
- **Inappropriate attitudes:** The cultural background may be very strongly male oriented and the trainees may not be used to working with females on an equal status basis.

Establish and clarify the circumstances and facts as quickly as possible. Access many different sources of information.

- Most concerns can be addressed by early, effective discussions between the Supervisor and the student culminating in a realistic learning plan, which is regularly reviewed to monitor satisfactory progress.
- An open and supportive culture should be encouraged within the whole clinical team, fostering the development of the student's skills and providing constructive feedback on performance improvements or ongoing difficulties.
- Only form a judgement once all information is collated. Issues of patient and person safety take precedence over all other considerations.

Remember poor performance is a 'symptom and not a diagnosis' and it is essential to explore the underlying cause or causes. Key areas to explore are:

- Clinical performance of the individual: knowledge, skills, communication
- Personal, personality and behavioural issues: professionalism, motivation, cultural & religious issues.
- Sickness / ill health: personal/family stress, career frustrations, financial

- Environmental issues: organisational, workload, bullying and harassment

A robust and detailed ‘diagnosis’ can lead to effective remediation: different problems require different solutions.

- A student with an evolving medical problem, eg. new diabetes or mental health issue, requires a different approach than an individual with poor interpersonal skills or lack of insight.
- The former needs engagement with occupational health and a GP, the latter perhaps supportive mentoring, close clinical supervision and feedback to change the beliefs behind the undesired behaviour.
- Where the issue is felt to be caused or contributed to by the educational environment (e.g. The student feels that they have been bullied or harassed) responsibility for managing that problem lies with Director of Medical Education

Clear documentation and communication is essential.

- All relevant discussions and interventions with the student **MUST** be documented, communicated to the student and other key individuals (listed below).
- University contacts **MUST** be involved at an early stage and kept informed of progress, and be involved in development of management plans
- Follow up should be by named accountable individuals such as the Educational Supervisor, Hospital Subdean or Director of Medical Education to ensure the process is concluded satisfactorily and managed appropriately.
- Where bullying or harassment are alleged Director of Medical Education must be informed in writing.

These notes have been adapted for students from ‘Managing Trainees in Difficulty: Practical Advice for Clinical and Educational Supervisors’. National Association of Clinical Tutors, October 2013.

Contacts

NHS Dumfries and Galloway Director of Medical Education : jean robson
jean.robson@nhs.net

University Contacts:

Glasgow Students : Hospital Sub Dean Chris Isles chris.isles@nhs.net

Dundee Students : In Psychiatry - Richard Day r.k.day@dundee.ac.uk
In GP blocks - Penny Lockwood p.lockwood@dundee.ac.uk
copying in Teresa Frater t.frater@dundee.ac.uk

Edinburgh Students : Email or contact Student support
MBChBstudentsupport@ed.ac.uk to be directed to the appropriate person

Aberdeen Students in GP: Kim Miller (Senior years GP co-ordinator)
kim.d.miller@abdn.ac.uk

Or Ewan Paterson, senior years co-ordinator. ewan.paterson@abdn.ac.uk

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