

# Difficult colleagues

Sara Williams from MPS offers some tips for dealing with challenging encounters of the most difficult kind

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## Good personal conduct, effective communication and respect for colleagues will avert most problems; however, what if the actions of your colleagues could harm patients?

The stress of the clinical workload means that mistakes are inevitable, but a distinction needs to be made between matters of personal conduct, poor performance and where a doctor's performance may be affected by a health issue (eg, depression, substance abuse, etc).

The GMC guidance says you should "support colleagues who have problems with performance, conduct or health", but action should be taken if this causes them to compromise patient care.<sup>1</sup>

If a colleague is self-prescribing, hurting patients or abusing substances, what should you do? If you believe the actions may put patients at risk, the GMC recommends that you raise your concerns with the medical director or a senior colleague. Local guidelines will be in place to deal with these situations should they arise and all doctors have a duty to make any concerns known.

### Scenario

Thursday morning surgery is about to begin, and Mr Martin, a senior consultant general surgeon, arrives and greets Margaret, a sister in theatre who has worked with him for 15 years. Mina is next to arrive; she is an F1 and aspires to be a breast surgeon. Unaware to Mina, Mr Martin lost his wife a year ago this week when her car hit a tree in slippery conditions.

Surgery commences and Mina begins to assist Mr Martin in what is her first case of the day. As they work through the list of patients, Mina observes Mr Martin struggle to suture a patient. Her concerns peak when he drops his forceps. Suddenly Mina becomes aware that there is the unmistakable whiff of alcohol. As she moves closer to assist Mr Martin, to her horror, she realises that the smell is coming from him. What should she do?

The characters in this scenario are fictitious



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## Advice – what to do with the drunken surgeon?

Mina is in an invidious position; she clearly has concerns that Mr Martin, a senior consultant, is operating under the influence of alcohol and these concerns are shared by Margaret, the theatre sister.

Put yourself in Mina's position. It is never easy when you suspect a colleague has a health problem that may affect their performance, especially when that colleague is senior, has been recently bereaved and may be the person you would have turned to for a reference. Despite this, you have a duty to protect patients from the risk of harm posed by a colleague's performance, health or conduct. You must, therefore, make patient safety the priority and act straight away if there is an immediate risk.

Margaret clearly shares your concerns and (if time allows) it would be helpful to discuss matters with her before deciding how best to proceed. You might wish to prepare a contemporaneous report outlining your concerns in a factual way. Approach a senior colleague to discuss the matter further. As a last resort, the trust will have a "whistle-blowing" policy which may be appropriate to use in these circumstances. You should be aware that whilst care is taken to safeguard the identity of the whistle-blower it may become obvious to Mr Martin who has raised concerns.

The alternative would be to approach a senior colleague, such as the clinical director, and outline your concerns in order that he or she can take matters further. The trust will have procedures for investigating and managing such concerns.

### Remember

- If you have reasonable grounds to believe that patients are at risk, then doing nothing is not an option.
- You have done nothing wrong and, provided that you report your concerns in a prompt and factual way, you will not be vulnerable to criticism.
- Once you have reported your concerns to the Trust, it is up to them to take matters forward in accordance with their procedures.
- Do not hesitate to contact MPS, as our medicolegal advisers would be happy to advise you in these or similar circumstances.<sup>2</sup>

### Support services doctors

- Doctors' Support Network: 0870 7650001 – [www.dsn.org.uk](http://www.dsn.org.uk)
- Practitioner Health Programme – [www.php.nhs.uk](http://www.php.nhs.uk)
- The BMA Counselling Service: 0845 9200169 (BMA members only)

### References

<sup>1</sup> Working with colleagues: Working in teams *Good Medical Practice* 2006 – [www.gmc-uk.org](http://www.gmc-uk.org)

<sup>2</sup> Paragraphs 13 and 44 Page 23 *Good Medical Practice* 2006 – [www.gmc-uk.org](http://www.gmc-uk.org)

## MPS professional support and expert advice

- **24-hour** medicolegal emergency advice line
- **Medicolegal publications**  
– *Casebook* and *New Doctor*
- **Risk Management materials** including medicolegal booklets
- **Online resources** including factsheets and case scenarios
- **Educational support** through discounts with leading publishers
- **Largest** international protection organisation

For more information call **0845 718 7187**  
Or visit **[www.mps.org.uk](http://www.mps.org.uk)**

