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Medical graduates and provisional registration with the GMC

Following a recent meeting with the Medical Schools Council, I am writing to remind you, and other universities with medical schools, the importance of only graduating medical students who are fit to become doctors.

The recently published inquiry report into Mid Staffordshire NHS Foundation Trust has underlined the responsibility of everyone involved in healthcare to place the highest priority on the safety of patients. This includes ensuring that only those doctors who are fit to practise medicine are admitted to the register, and universities that award medical degrees have an important part in helping us achieve that.

Being a doctor is a huge privilege, but it carries correspondingly huge responsibilities. As you know, a medical degree is not just a recognition of academic achievement, it is a passport to the medical profession.

As you are aware, students who graduate with a primary medical qualification from your institution are entitled to provisional registration as a doctor, provided their fitness to practise is not impaired. Tomorrow’s Doctors, which sets out the standards we require in undergraduate medical education, makes it clear that medical schools (and by extension their parent universities):

‘have a responsibility to the public, to employers and to the profession to ensure that only those students who are fit to practise as doctors are allowed to complete the curriculum and gain provisional registration with a licence to practise’. (Para 37).

We have recently received several queries about provisional registration, asking whether the GMC can grant registration with conditions, for example, in cases where the medical school has some doubt about a student’s fitness to practise. The simple answer is that we
can only register those whose fitness to practise is not impaired. There is no category of provisional registration that is subject to conditions. By graduating a medical student, the university is declaring to us, as regulator, that it considers that individual is fit to practise medicine.

It follows therefore that if a university is not of that view, it must not allow that student to graduate with a medical degree. Depending on the circumstances, it may be appropriate to allow a student to graduate with a non-registrable degree, and that is of course a matter for the university concerned.

We are keen to work with you to ensure that, as well as fulfilling the academic requirement of their course, those entering the profession have demonstrated appropriate professional values. We realise that, in some cases, this can be a difficult matter for medical schools and universities to address, and we wish to be as supportive as possible.

We are planning to revisit our current guidance *Medical students: professional behaviour and fitness to practise* and more generally to promote the importance of professionalism with students. This will build on the revisions we have made in the new edition of our core guidance, *Good Medical Practice*, which we will be publishing shortly. I hope that, in collaboration with the Medical Schools Council, we will be able to work with your medical school to achieve this.

I would be grateful if you could share this letter with those involved with student fitness to practise cases and appeals, both in your medical school and university. If you or your colleagues would find it helpful to discuss it further, do please let me know.

I am copying this letter for information to Professor David Wynford-Thomas, the dean of your medical school, the secretary of State for Health, Rt Hon Jeremy Hunt MP and the Chief Medical Officer, Dame Sally Davies.

Niall Dickson