Leicester Medical School

Code of Practice for Illness in Medical Students

Purpose

The purpose of this Code of Practice is primarily to clarify the support services available to medical students with illness. The Code also clarifies apprenticeship and Fitness to Practise issues that may arise.

What should a student do if they are ill?

Students are able to ‘self-certificate’ for up to one week (5 working days). The medical school will keep a record of all sickness absence. If the student is ill for more than one week, then he/she must obtain a Fit note from their GP. Students should note that the GMC states that medical students should register with the GP University Student Health Service. The role of the Student Health Service is primarily to diagnose, support and treat a student. If the student would like advice from the Occupational Health Service on issues such as the impact of their illness on their studies or career then students may self-refer to the Occupational Health Service.

What is the maximum time that a student can be absent from the course due to ill health?

The maximum total time is 10 working days per annum for Phase 1 and 15 working days per annum for Phase 2. Attendance and Leave Entitlements 2014-15.pdf

What should a student do if they think that they may exceed the maximum absence times above?

If a student thinks that they may have to exceed the maximum absence times above they should immediately contact the Phase 1 or Phase 2 Lead.

What happens if I have to exceed the maximum absence times above?

Students will need to apply to suspend their studies and restart the relevant academic year.

Suspension of Studies.pdf

What happens if I disagree with the Medical School that I should suspend my studies?

The Medical School would always prefer that the decision that a student should suspend their studies due to illness would be made with the agreement of the student. The student will have received advice from his/her medical practitioners, including the Occupational Health Service, and would normally come to the decision with the Medical School that it was in the student’s best interest to suspend studies. However, there will be times when the Medical School
School and a student disagree about whether suspending studies is the right thing to do. In this situation there are two options:

1. The student can make a complaint to the Dean of the College via the Student Complaint process.  [http://www2.le.ac.uk/offices/sas2/regulations/appeals-complaints/documents/regulations_studentcomplaints.pdf](http://www2.le.ac.uk/offices/sas2/regulations/appeals-complaints/documents/regulations_studentcomplaints.pdf).

2. The Medical School can use its Fitness to Practise procedures to handle a disagreement. [http://www.gmc-uk.org/education/undergraduate/23289.asp](http://www.gmc-uk.org/education/undergraduate/23289.asp). This is not to punish the student but to make sure that the decision is made in a fair and independent way. This does, however, have the disadvantage to the student that an appearance before a Fitness to Practise Panel would have to be declared to the GMC at the point of applying for provisional registration.

Physical Health Conditions

Students should consult with the Student Health Service for advice on diagnosis and treatment. If a student is concerned about the impact of their illness on their fitness to train or practise the student should contact the Occupational Health Service. Students must follow the Medical School policies regarding absence from the course and suspension of studies (see above).

Mental Health Conditions

Leicester Medical School’s policies on supporting students with mental health conditions is guided by the GMC document entitled 'Supporting Medical Students with Mental Health Conditions' [http://www.gmc-uk.org/education/undergraduate/23289.asp](http://www.gmc-uk.org/education/undergraduate/23289.asp). Students are particularly advised to read the section on ‘myth busters’. This GMC document requires Medical Schools to have policies on Confidentiality and Occupational Health Services. Leicester Medical School’s policies are available at [http://www2.le.ac.uk/departments/msce/undergraduate/medicine/regulations](http://www2.le.ac.uk/departments/msce/undergraduate/medicine/regulations). Although the principles governing the way that the Medical School supports students with mental health conditions and physical ill health are identical, the former is more diverse and some points of clarification are therefore provided below.

Definitions

In line with GMC guidance mental health conditions are classified as follows.

*Stress*
Stress is extremely common and affects most students at some time. In fact, studying medicine can itself be a source of stress for students. Feeling stressed is not the same as having a mental health condition or illness, although repeated stressful experiences can be a risk factor for developing physical and mental health problems. Many symptoms of mental health conditions, such as anxiety, are also normal experiences and often occur when people are under stress. Stress can be a normal experience that affects many medical students especially during periods of transition i.e. home to university, phase 1 to phase 2, relationship issues, etc.

**Mild to moderate mental health conditions**
Mild-to-moderate mental health conditions are common and can affect 15–25% of the general population at any one time. They include:
- depression
- generalised anxiety disorder
- panic disorder
- social anxiety disorder
- obsessive compulsive disorder
- post-traumatic stress disorder

These common mental health conditions can usually be treated in primary care rather than secondary care settings. However, medical students have a higher prevalence of depression and anxiety than the general population, so it is important that these students are identified so that they can be supported in the right way, in particular, some students may need adjustments to their training to support them while they are unwell.

**Severe mental illnesses**
This includes:
- schizophrenia
- severe depression
- bipolar affective disorder (manic depression).

These conditions are relatively uncommon. Treating them will usually involve local community mental health services as well as primary care services.

**Eating disorders**
Eating disorders are characterised by an abnormal attitude towards food that causes someone to change their eating habits and behaviour. People with eating disorders typically eat too little or too much, or use harmful ways to get rid of calories. The two most common forms of eating disorder are:
- **anorexia nervosa** – where the person restricts their calorie intake and can include using excessive exercise to burn calories
- **bulimia nervosa** – where the person tries to control their weight by binge eating and then deliberately being sick or using laxatives.

**Substance misuse (including alcohol)**
The use of alcohol or other controlled substances (dependence and excessive use of prescription medicine e.g. opiate analgesia) is defined as substance misuse when it starts to have a negative impact on the way a person functions. People with substance misuse problems often have a pattern of use that results in social, psychological or physical harm. Patterns of use that can cause harm include:

- intoxication
- bingeing
- regular use with physical or psychological dependence

The GMC states that use of controlled substances that are illegal is *always* a fitness to practise issue. As required by the GMC, Leicester Medical School will enforce this regulation in the case of students who behave unprofessionally. However, Leicester Medical School will also offer support to students who are addicted to controlled substances. Please see ***Drug and alcohol link***

**What support is available for students with stress?**
Students should arrange to meet with a member of the Pastoral Support Unit. The Pastoral Support Unit offers a wide range of support.

**What support is available to students with mild to moderate mental health conditions?**
Students are strongly advised to arrange to meet with a member of the Pastoral Support Unit, even if they have also been seen by the GP Student Health Service. This is because the Pastoral Support Unit has extensive knowledge of the MB ChB Programme and of the various support agencies within and outside the University. In addition, but only with the student’s informed consent, the Pastoral Support Unit can work with the Medical School to support the student and help the student to continue on the course. The Occupational Health Service can advise on reasonable adjustments as detailed in paragraphs 96 to 100 of the GMC document entitled ‘Supporting Medical Students with Mental Health Conditions’ [http://www.gmc-uk.org/education/undergraduate/23289.asp](http://www.gmc-uk.org/education/undergraduate/23289.asp).

**What support is available to students with severe mental illnesses?**
A student with severe mental illness will usually be under the care of local community mental health services as well as primary care services. Students are strongly advised to arrange to meet with a member of the Pastoral Support Unit, even if they have also been seen by the GP Student Health Service and/or the Community Mental Health Team. This is because the Pastoral Support Unit has extensive knowledge of the MB ChB Programme and of the various support agencies within and outside the University. In addition, but only with the student’s informed consent, the Pastoral Support Unit can work with the Medical School to support the student and help the student to continue on the course. The Occupational Health Service can advise on reasonable adjustments as detailed in paragraphs 96 to 100 of the GMC document entitled ‘Supporting Medical Students with Mental Health Conditions’ [http://www.gmc-uk.org/education/undergraduate/23289.asp](http://www.gmc-uk.org/education/undergraduate/23289.asp).
What support is available to students with eating disorders?
A student who is concerned that he/she may have or does have an eating disorder is advised to arrange to meet their GP and with a member of the Pastoral Support Unit. This is because the Pastoral Support Unit has extensive knowledge of the MB ChB Programme and of the various support agencies within and outside the University. In addition, but only with the student’s informed consent, the Pastoral Support Unit can work with the Medical School to support the student and help the student to continue on the course. Occasionally, suspending academic study in order to receive effective intensive treatment before restarting your studies may be the best long term solution prior to qualification/employment.

What support is available to students with substance misuse (including alcohol)?
A student who is concerned that he/she may have a problem with substance misuse is advised to arrange to meet with their GP and with a member of the Pastoral Support Unit. This is because the Pastoral Support Unit has extensive knowledge of the MB ChB Programme and of the various support agencies within and outside the University. In addition, but only with the student’s informed consent, the Pastoral Support Unit can work with the Medical School and if appropriate, Occupational Health, to support the student and help the student to continue on the course. See Drug and Alcohol Misuse Regulations

Fitness to Practise, Confidentiality issues and illness

Fundamental Principles

1. Patient safety, the safety of others and the safety of the affected student will always take precedence over other issues
2. Leicester Medical School is fully committed to supporting students with physical and/or mental health illness.
3. Leicester Medical School applies the same principles in respect of confidentiality and Fitness to Practise to physical and mental health illness.

Confidentiality

- The Pastoral Support Unit and Occupational Health Service will only breach student confidentiality under strictly defined conditions. These rare conditions are detailed and explained at the following links: Occupational Health Data Protection
- Providing a student’s illness has not led to a professionalism (including attendance) concern, if a student so wishes, there is no requirement for the Medical School to be
made aware of an illness. This has the advantage that a student’s privacy is protected, but the disadvantage that because the Medical School does not know about the illness, reasonable adjustments cannot be applied.

- If a student with an illness seeks advice from the Occupational Health Service, the service may be able to advise the Medical School regarding reasonable adjustments without needing to provide the details of the illness to the Medical School.

**Fitness to Practise**

- A student with an illness is strongly advised to contact the Pastoral Support Unit. However, this is not compulsory and failure to do so will not be viewed a professionalism issue or concern. However, all students should be registered with the GP Student Health Service.

- If professionalism (including failure of attendance) issues arise in a student with an illness, the Professionalism Concerns Group/Fitness to Practise Committee will take the following into account during their deliberations:

  1. Has the student taken appropriate action to seek treatment and support? Failure to do so is itself unprofessional.
  2. If a student has requested support, has the Medical School provided appropriate support?
  3. Is there any additional support that a student could receive to help the student to improve his/her professionalism

**The prevention of mental health conditions**

Dr Jonathan Hales (Senior Lecturer in Medical Education) and Dr Sophie Parkinson (Pastoral Support Lead) have been tasked with developing a mindfulness and resilience programme. Parts of this Programme will be in place by September 2014.