

## **Pandemic Flu – Your questions answered**

### **Medical Students Committee**

The recent outbreak of the H1N1 virus (commonly known as 'swine flu') has the potential to put tremendous pressure on the NHS. The Departments of Health have drawn up detailed contingency plans on how to manage the pandemic most effectively. This guidance contains plans to potentially utilise the skills and knowledge of medical students to ease the pressure on an NHS depleted by staff sickness and overstretched by flu cases.

This Q&A has been put together from the detailed guidance from the Department of Health to help you make sense of what may be asked of you and how it could effect your education. More specific guidance for students will be added to this page as more information becomes available, so keep checking back.

#### **Your Questions Answered...**

#### **HELPING IN A PANDEMIC**

##### **Q Will I be asked to help in the pandemic?**

At present the NHS is still operating as normal, however if the NHS moves to full pandemic mode, you may be asked to help.

Medical students will not be required to help but may be asked to volunteer to help maintain critical services during a time of emergency. Students will not be expected to act outside of their competency, and the duties asked are likely to vary from Trust to Trust, depending on local need.

The Medical Schools Council guidance states:

Students should be required to opt in to any scheme rather than opt out and all students should receive adequate, nationally agreed information about the consequences of opting in.

The Department of Health NHS Human Resources guidance says:

Paragraph 2.34 - If educational institutions are closed to limit the spread of the pandemic, educational and academic staff (including those based in deaneries) could also assist, eg by providing professional supervision and other support for healthcare students. (The potential role of healthcare students is discussed in paragraph 2.45.) The use of healthcare students needs to be carefully considered and properly supervised. Healthcare students should not be used as substitute staff.

From paragraph 2.47

...The level at which students could work will depend on the competencies they have at each stage of their studies. Expectations of the role of students during a pandemic would depend on the stage, experience and level of competence. If students are to contribute outside their programme, it must be appropriate to the level of knowledge, skill and experience as well as the supervision available and the degree of complexity. For example, final year medical students could probably assist to a higher degree. Where students were carrying out work related tasks, they should be issued with 'honorary contracts' to ensure

that they are covered by indemnity insurance and health and safety rules. In addition, where duties are substantial and sustained, some form of payment would be appropriate. Supervision will be essential and educational clinicians could assist with this as they will not be undertaking their normal work.

**Q Should I return early from my elective to help out?**

There is no need to return early from an elective. So far no students have been asked to assist so there is no need to alter your plans.

POTENTIAL EFFECT ON EDUCATION

**Q What effect will the flu pandemic have on my education?**

Pandemic flu could disrupt your education in two ways – time out of normal study to assist with NHS work and through the closure of universities as an infection control measure. Either way the BMA is working closely with the DH, GMC and Medical Schools Council to ensure that any disruption will be minimised and that no disadvantage will be suffered by students who volunteer to help or have exams cancelled. More information about how any lost time will be replaced will be posted here when it has been decided.

The Department of health guidance says:

2.44 It is anticipated that a pandemic could severely restrict the availability of educational provision. For example, educational institutions could close as a public health measure or due to staff absence or redeployment of educationalists. The cohort of students affected will still need to be dealt with effectively. Depending on when a pandemic strikes, this could affect more than one cohort of students. The GMC is therefore considering which steps to take to safeguard the interests of medical students. Parallel issues will also arise for other types of student as clinical placements may not be practicable during the height of the outbreak.

**Q. What will happen if my finals are disrupted by the pandemic?**

2.45 The GMC is also considering how best to deal with the graduation of final year medical students. One option would be to allow final year students to be given a provisional graduation without taking their final exam. They would be given a form of registration and could work under supervision, therefore being available to help sustain services. These steps would only be taken when the pandemic had reached a level where this approach would be beneficial. Students would need to work under clinical supervision and within their scope of competence. Transitional arrangements for the operation of the Foundation Training Programme would then be required. The GMC is continuing to work on policy proposals in this area and there will need to be further discussions with stakeholders.

WORKING IN THE PANDEMIC

**Q Will medical students need temporary registration with the GMC to undertake duties in a pandemic?**

Students engaged in clinical duties (very likely to be final year students only) would need temporary registration from the GMC, under section 18A of the Medical Act 1983. This requires the Secretary of State to declare that a healthcare emergency is taking place. We are not currently in this situation but if this was to happen the GMC can give temporary

registration to students whose duties require it. Such registration is likely to be limited to those specific roles which they would be undertaking.

The Department of Health NHS Human Resources guidance says:

2.38 Changes to legislation to allow emergency registration, eg of doctors, is being considered. This would allow for increased capacity in the medical workforce of doctors who may have never registered in the UK, final year medical students and retired doctors with lapsed registration. The registration would be temporary and would cease once the pandemic (and any aftermath) is considered to be over.

**Q What form of indemnity would cover medical students working in the pandemic and will the work be paid?**

Medical students would be given temporary contracts of employment, which would provide cover as for qualified doctors. Students will be paid for NHS work, but the details have yet to be finalised.

The Department of Health guidance says:

2.47 Employers would also need to consider how best to deploy medical and other clinical students if it is feasible and beneficial to do so. It is recognised that higher education institutions providing health professional training will need to agree these protocols and this is best done at local level. Medical and other students already carry out a range of tasks and could therefore provide a variety of assistance during a pandemic. They would supplement rather than substitute clinical staff. The level at which students could work will depend on the competencies they have at each stage of their studies. Expectations of the role of students during a pandemic would depend on the stage, experience and level of competence. If students are to contribute outside their programme, it must be appropriate to the level of knowledge, skill and experience as well as the supervision available and the degree of complexity. For example, final year medical students could probably assist to a higher degree. Where students were carrying out work related tasks, they should be issued with 'honorary contracts' to ensure that they are covered by indemnity insurance and health and safety rules. In addition, where duties are substantial and sustained, some form of payment would be appropriate. Supervision will be essential and educational clinicians could assist with this as they will not be undertaking their normal work.

**Q. What sort of work might I be asked to do?**

As while on electives, students should not be asked to act outside of their area of competence and experience. The precise duties likely to be asked of medical students are not yet known, but a clearer idea will become available as the pandemic progresses and the areas of pressure become apparent. Both the Department of Health and Medical Schools Council are clear that only final year students are likely to be given clinical duties (as defined by the Trust), while students from other years will be given tasks such as manning phone lines and helping with administration.

From paragraph 2.47

...The level at which students could work will depend on the competencies they have at each stage of their studies. Expectations of the role of students during a pandemic would depend on the stage, experience and level of competence. If students are to contribute outside their programme, it must be appropriate to the level of knowledge, skill and experience as well as the supervision available and the degree of complexity. For example, final year medical students could probably assist to a higher degree. Where students were carrying out work related tasks, they should be issued with 'honorary contracts' to ensure

that they are covered by indemnity insurance and health and safety rules. In addition, where duties are substantial and sustained, some form of payment would be appropriate. Supervision will be essential and educational clinicians could assist with this as they will not be undertaking their normal work.

**Q What sort of training would medical students receive?**

The Department of Health guidance says:

Where staff or students are working outside their normal role, they need to continue to work within their scope of competence and receive adequate training and supervision. Provided that these are in place, there should not be any greater risk of the employee being sued. Students in particular should be properly supervised. Registered staff should be guided by their professional codes, eg for medical staff, the forthcoming statement on Good Medical Practice from the GMC and for nurses and midwives, see Annex A.

The full guidance from which this Q&A was produced can be found here:

Medical Schools Council - Responding to an influenza pandemic: the use of medical students to support the NHS

<http://www.medschools.ac.uk/AboutUs/Projects/Documents/Use%20of%20medical%20students%20to%20support%20the%20NHS%20during%20Pandemic%20Flu%20July%202009.pdf>

Pandemic influenza - Human resources guidance for the NHS (Department of Health, NHS Employers)

[http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Publications/PublicationsPolicyAndGuidance/DH\\_080742](http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Publications/PublicationsPolicyAndGuidance/DH_080742)

Pandemic Flu A national framework for responding to an influenza pandemic (Cabinet Office, Department of Health)

[http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Publications/PublicationsPolicyAndGuidance/DH\\_080734](http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Publications/PublicationsPolicyAndGuidance/DH_080734)

Other useful links

British Medical Journal (BMJ) - Pandemic Flu updates homepage  
<http://pandemicflu.bmj.com/>

General Medical Council - 'Good Medical Practice: Responsibilities of doctors in a national pandemic'. [http://www.gmc-uk.org/guidance/news\\_consultation/medical\\_pandemic.asp](http://www.gmc-uk.org/guidance/news_consultation/medical_pandemic.asp)

Health Protection Agency (HPA) Swine Flu updates

<http://www.hpa.org.uk/webw/HPAweb&Page&HPAwebAutoListName/Page/1240732817665?p=1240732817665>

Is your question not answered here? Email [info.students@bma.org.uk](mailto:info.students@bma.org.uk)