



# Care of Acutely Ill People

*One in a series of curriculum statements produced by the Royal College of General Practitioners:*

- 1 Being a General Practitioner**
- 2 The General Practice Consultation**
- 3 Personal and Professional Responsibilities**
  - 3.1 Clinical Governance
  - 3.2 Patient Safety
  - 3.3 Clinical Ethics and Values-Based Practice
  - 3.4 Promoting Equality and Valuing Diversity
  - 3.5 Evidence-Based Practice
  - 3.6 Research and Academic Activity
  - 3.7 Teaching, Mentoring and Clinical Supervision
- 4 Management**
  - 4.1 Management in Primary Care
  - 4.2 Information Management and Technology
- 5 Healthy People: promoting health and preventing disease**
- 6 Genetics in Primary Care**
- 7 Care of Acutely Ill People**
- 8 Care of Children and Young People**
- 9 Care of Older Adults**
- 10 Gender-Specific Health Issues**
  - 10.1 Women's Health
  - 10.2 Men's Health
- 11 Sexual Health**
- 12 Care of People with Cancer & Palliative Care**
- 13 Care of People with Mental Health Problems**
- 14 Care of People with Learning Disabilities**
- 15 Clinical Management**
  - 15.1 Cardiovascular Problems
  - 15.2 Digestive Problems
  - 15.3 Drug and Alcohol Problems
  - 15.4 ENT and Facial Problems
  - 15.5 Eye Problems
  - 15.6 Metabolic Problems
  - 15.7 Neurological Problems
  - 15.8 Respiratory Problems
  - 15.9 Rheumatology and Conditions of the Musculoskeletal System (including Trauma)
  - 15.10 Skin Problems



# Contents

---

## **Acknowledgements** 5

Key messages 5

## **Introduction** 6

Rationale for this curriculum statement 6

UK health priorities 6

## **Learning Outcomes** 7

Primary care management 7

Person-centred care 8

Specific problem-solving skills 8

A comprehensive approach 8

Community orientation 8

A holistic approach 9

Contextual aspects 9

Attitudinal aspects 9

Scientific aspects 9

Psychomotor skills 9

The knowledge base 10

## **Further Reading** 11

Examples of relevant texts and resources 11

Web resources 11

## **Promoting Learning about Acutely Ill People** 12

Work-based learning – in primary care 12

Work-based learning – in secondary care 12

Non-work-based learning 12

Learning with other healthcare professionals 12

**Appendix 1** 14

COGPED position paper on out-of-hours training for specialty registrars (GP), 2004 14

**Appendix 2** 21

Acute care competences from Foundation Years 1 and 2 21

**Appendix 3** 26

'Dangerous' diagnoses 26

**References** 27

# Acknowledgements

---

The Royal College of General Practitioners would like to express its thanks to these individuals and organisations.

*Authors:* Dr Steve Ball, Dr Alasdair Strachan, Dr Mike Deighan, Professor Steve Field, Dr Amar Rughani

*Contributors:* Professor Abdol Tavabie, Dr Stephen Kelly, Committee of Postgraduate General Practice Education Directors (COGPED), Joy Dale, Ailsa Donnelly & the RCGP Patient Partnership Group

*Editors:* Dr Mike Deighan & Professor Steve Field

*Guardian:* Professor Abdol Tavabie

*Created:* December 2004

*Date of this update:* January 2006

## Key messages

General practitioners must:

- Be able to work effectively in teams and coordinate care
- Be able to prioritise problems and establish a differential diagnosis
- Make the patient's safety a priority
- Consider the appropriateness of interventions according to patients' wishes, the severity of the illness and any chronic or co-morbid diseases
- Be able to make mental state assessments and ensure patient safety
- Accept responsibility for action, at the same time recognising any need for involvement of more experienced personnel
- Keep their resuscitation skills up to date – this would normally involve a yearly certified resuscitation course
- Act calmly in emergency situations and follow agreed protocols.

# Introduction

---

## Rationale for this curriculum statement

Acutely ill people of all ages present unpredictably, interrupting work and routines, and requiring an urgent response. They may be seen in familiar contexts such as the surgery, on home visits and in out-of-hours centres; the general practitioner (GP) may be asked to give assistance in unfamiliar and unsupported surroundings such as at the roadside.

While the *new* GP contract (nGMS)<sup>1</sup> defined the normal working day for GPs to be between 08.00 and 18.30 on all weekdays except public holidays, many GPs will continue to be involved in the provision of care outside those hours. The Out of Hours Service is defined as that work undertaken between 18.30–08.00 and all day at weekends and on public holidays. The sort of care provided out of hours, however, does not just refer to the management of emergencies, but also to the experience of dealing with patient contacts in a different quantity and context from the normal working day. Emergency care, therefore, is a feature of both in-hours and out-of-hours work, but there are particular features of the out-of-hours period, such as isolation, the relative lack of supporting services and the need for proper self-care, that require a specific educational focus.

The Committee of Postgraduate General Practice Education Directors (COGPED) set out its position that specialty registrars (GP) should continue to obtain experience in out-of-hours care irrespective of whether their trainer had opted out of providing out-of-hours care in their guidance on *Out of Hours (OOH) Training for GP Registrars in 2004* (Appendix 1).<sup>2</sup> The publication followed a period of consultation with stakeholders including patients and concluded that the generalist role of the GP should be maintained and that newly accredited GPs should be expected to have demonstrated their ability to perform competently in out-of-hours primary care. Based on the work of Mclean and Houghton,<sup>3</sup> they defined six core competences, which are incorporated into this curriculum statement.

Although emergency care support (e.g. through paramedics) is increasingly available across the UK, it is not universal and there may be significant delays before help arrives. Nevertheless, the public, through the General Medical Council and other legal frameworks, expects a level of expertise in its medical practitioners that includes the ability to manage acute situations despite variable access to equipment and support.

GPs should be able to recognise that a person is acutely ill and take timely and appropriate action. These situations are relatively infrequent, making it difficult for the doctor to maintain the appropriate skills, some of which may be complex. Realisation of this fact along with periodic emergency care training in realistic situations will help doctors to maintain an effective response.

## UK health priorities

Some 10–15% of patients consult a GP for serious illness.<sup>4</sup> A proportion of these will be acutely ill. Recent changes to educational frameworks sponsored by the Department of Health have emphasised the care of acutely ill patients.<sup>5</sup> The importance of early coordinated intervention is stressed in the English National Service Framework (NSF) on *Coronary Heart Disease*.<sup>6</sup> The role of primary care is discussed in *Improving the Management of Patients with Mental Ill Health in Emergency Settings*.<sup>7</sup> Strategies have been developed in all of the United Kingdom's home countries.

## Learning Outcomes

---

The following learning objectives relate specifically to the care of acutely ill people and include the care of patients in ‘out of hours’ primary care. Because of the nature of acute illness presenting to the GP, this curriculum statement should be read in conjunction with the other RCGP curriculum statements in the series. The full range of generic competences is described in the *core* RCGP curriculum statement 1, *Being a General Practitioner*.

The effective management of an acutely ill person will include recognition and immediate management. A wide range of (primarily) medical knowledge and skills will support these two areas. Of equal importance, however, in the management of these patients, is organisation, teamwork, communication and situational awareness. Poor performance in these four attributes predicts a poor outcome in the management of emergencies.<sup>i</sup>

The learning objectives for the specialty registrar (GP) reflect this. The most common immediately life-threatening emergencies are covered. The specialty registrar should be aware of how a response may change across a range of situations.

When selected to a general practice training programme in the United Kingdom, specialty registrars will have demonstrated that they had acquired the acute care competences described in *The Curriculum for the Foundation Years in Postgraduate Education and Training* published by the Departments of Health of the United Kingdom in 2005.<sup>8</sup> A list of the acute care competences described in the Foundation Curriculum can be found in Appendix 2; it is assumed, therefore, that specialty registrars will have acquired those competences in addition to those in this curriculum statement.

In order to demonstrate the core competences in the area of acutely ill people, by the end of their general practice training programme, specialty registrars should have acquired knowledge, skills and appropriate attitudes in the following areas.

### Primary care management

- Recognise and evaluate acutely ill patients.
- Describe how the presentation may be changed by age and other factors such as gender, ethnicity, pregnancy and previous health.
- Recognise death.
- Demonstrate an ability to make complex ethical decisions demonstrating sensitivity to a patient’s wishes in the planning of care.
- Provide clear leadership, demonstrating an understanding of the team approach to care of the acutely ill and the roles of the practice staff in managing patients and relatives.
- Coordinate care with other professionals in primary care and with other specialists.
- Take responsibility for a decision to admit an acutely ill person and not be unduly influenced by others, such as secondary care doctors who have not assessed the patient.

<sup>i</sup> up to 70–80% of errors are due to poor performance in these areas

## **The GP must be competent to provide out of hours care by demonstrating:**

- Ability to manage common medical, surgical and psychiatric emergencies in the out-of-hours setting
- Understanding of the organisational aspects of NHS out-of-hours care
- Ability to make appropriate referrals to hospitals and other professionals in the out-of-hours setting
- Appropriate communication skills required for out-of-hours care
- Individual personal time and stress management
- Maintenance of personal security and awareness and management of the security risks to others.

## **Person-centred care**

- Describe ways in which the acute illness itself and the anxiety caused by it can impair communication between doctor and patient, and make the patient's safety a priority.
- Demonstrate a person-centred approach, respecting patients' autonomy whilst recognising that acutely ill patients often have a diminished capacity for autonomy.
- Describe the challenges of maintaining continuity of care in acute illness and taking steps to minimise this by making suitable handover and follow-up arrangements.
- Describe the needs of carers involved at the time of the acutely ill person's presentation.
- Demonstrate an awareness of any conflict regarding management that may exist between patients and their relatives, and act in the best interests of the patient.

## **Specific problem-solving skills**

- Describe differential diagnoses for each presenting symptom.
- Decide whether urgent action is necessary, thus protecting patients with non-urgent and self-limiting problems from the potentially detrimental consequences of being over-investigated, over-treated or deprived of their liberty.
- Demonstrate an ability to deal sensitively and in line with professional codes of practice with people who may have a serious diagnosis and refuse admission.
- Demonstrate an ability to use telephone triage:
  - ◆ to decide to use ambulance where speed of referral to secondary care or paramedic intervention is paramount
  - ◆ to make appropriate arrangements to see the patient
  - ◆ to give advice where appropriate.
- Demonstrate the use of time as a tool and to use iterative review and safety-netting as appropriate.

## **A comprehensive approach**

- Recognise that an acute illness may be an acute exacerbation of a chronic disease.
- Describe the increased risk of acute events in patients with chronic and co-morbid disease.
- Identify co-morbid diseases.
- Describe the modifying effect of chronic or co-morbid disease and its treatment on the presentation of acute illness.
- Recognise patients who are likely to need acute care and offer them advice on prevention, effective self-management and when and who to call for help.

## **Community orientation**

- Demonstrate an ability to use knowledge of patient and family, and the availability of specialist community

resources, to decide whether a patient should be referred for acute care or less acute assessment or rehabilitation, thus using resources appropriately.

- Deal with situational crises and manipulative patients, avoiding the inappropriate use of healthcare resources.

## A holistic approach

- Demonstrate an awareness of the important technical and pastoral support that a GP needs to provide to patients and carers at times of crisis or bereavement including certification of illness or death.
- Demonstrate an awareness of cultural and other factors that might affect patient management.

## Contextual aspects

- Demonstrate an awareness of legal frameworks affecting acute healthcare provision especially regarding compulsory admission and treatment.
- Demonstrate an awareness of the tensions between acute and routine care and impact of workload on the care given to the individual patients.
- Demonstrate an awareness of the impact of the doctor's working environment and resources on the care provided.
- Demonstrate an understanding of the local arrangements for the provision of out-of-hours care.

## Attitudinal aspects

- Demonstrate an awareness of their personal values and attitudes to ensure that they do not influence their professional decisions or the equality of patients' access to acute care.
- Identify patients for whom resuscitation or intensive care might be inappropriate and take advice from carers and colleagues.
- Demonstrate a balanced view of benefits and harms of medical treatment.
- Demonstrate an awareness of the emotional and stressful aspects of providing acute care and an awareness that they need to have strategies for dealing with personal stress to ensure that it does not impair the provision of care to patients.

## Scientific aspects

- Describe how to use decision support to make their interventions evidence-based, e.g. Cochrane, PRODIGY, etc.
- Demonstrate an understanding of written protocols that are available from national bodies and how these may be adapted to unusual circumstances.
- Evaluate their performance in regard to the care of the acutely ill person; including an ability to conduct significant event analyses and take appropriate action.

## Psychomotor skills

- Performing and interpreting an electrocardiogram.
- Cardiopulmonary resuscitation of children and adults including use of a defibrillator.
- Controlling a haemorrhage and suturing a wound.
- Passing a urinary catheter.
- Using a nebuliser.

## The knowledge base

### Symptoms

- Cardiovascular – chest pain, haemorrhage, shock.
- Respiratory – wheeze, breathlessness, stridor, choking.
- Central nervous system – convulsions, reduced conscious level, confusion.
- Mental health – threatened self-harm, delusional states, violent patients.
- Severe pain.

### Common and/or important conditions

- Shock (including no cardiac output), acute coronary syndromes, haemorrhage (revealed or concealed), ischaemia, pulmonary embolus, asthma.
- Dangerous diagnoses (see Appendix 3).
- Common problems that may be expected with certain practice activities: anaphylaxis after immunisation, local anaesthetic toxicity and vaso-vagal attacks with, for example, minor surgery or intra-uterine contraceptive device insertion.
- Parasuicide and suicide attempts.

### Investigation

- Blood glucose.
- Other investigations are rare in primary care because acutely ill patients needing investigation are usually referred to secondary care.

### Treatment

- Pre-hospital management of convulsions and acute dyspnoea.

### Emergency care

- The 'ABC' principles in initial management.
- Appreciate the response time required in order to optimise the outcome.
- Understand the organisational aspects of NHS out-of-hours care.
- Understand the importance of maintaining personal security and awareness and management of the security risks to others.

### Resources

- Appropriate use of emergency services, including logistics of how to obtain an ambulance/paramedic crew.
- Familiarity with available equipment in own car/bag and that carried by emergency services.
- Selection and maintenance of appropriate equipment and un-expired drugs that should be carried by GPs.
- Being able to organise and lead a response when required, which may include participation by staff, members of the public or qualified responders.
- Knowledge of training required for practice staff and others as a team in the appropriate responses to an acutely ill person.

### Prevention

- Advice to patients on prevention, e.g. with a patient with known heart disease, advice on how to manage ischaemic pain including use of glyceryl trinitrate (GTN), aspirin and appropriate first-line use of paramedic ambulance.

# Further Reading

---

## Examples of relevant texts and resources

- BRITISH MEDICAL ASSOCIATION AND THE ROYAL PHARMACEUTICAL SOCIETY OF GREAT BRITAIN. *The British National Formulary* London: Pharmaceutical Press, updated regularly
- BRITISH MEDICAL ASSOCIATION, ROYAL PHARMACEUTICAL SOCIETY OF GREAT BRITAIN, ROYAL COLLEGE OF PAEDIATRICS AND CHILD HEALTH, THE NEONATAL AND PAEDIATRIC PHARMACISTS GROUP. *BNF for Children* London: BMA, 2005
- COMMITTEE OF GENERAL PRACTICE EDUCATION DIRECTORS. *Out of Hours (OOH) Training for GP Registrars* London: COGPED, 2004
- HAMPTON JR. *The ECG Made Easy (6th edn)* London: Churchill Livingstone, 2003
- JONES R, BRITTEN N, CULPEPPER L, *et al.* (eds). *Oxford Textbook of Primary Medical Care* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004
- MORTON RJ AND PHILLIPS BM. *Accidents and Emergencies in Children (Oxford Handbooks in Emergency Medicine)* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996
- SKINNER D AND DRISCOLL P. *ABC of Major Trauma (4th edn)* Oxford: Blackwell Publishing & BMJ Books, 2006
- SPRIGINGS DC AND CHAMBERS JB. *Acute Medicine: a practical guide to the management of medical emergencies* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001
- WARRELL D, COX TM, FIRTH JD, BENZ EJ (eds). *Oxford Textbook of Medicine (4th edn)* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004
- WYATT JP, ILLINGWORTH RN, CLANCY MJ, MUNRO P, ROBERTSON CE. *Oxford Handbook of Accident and Emergency Medicine* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005

## Web resources

### National Electronic Library for Health and National Electronic Library for Public Health

The aim of the National Electronic Library for Health (NeLH) is to provide clinicians with access to the best current know-how and knowledge to support health care-related decisions. Patients, carers and the public are also welcome to use the site, because the NeLH is open to all. The ultimate aim is for the Library to be a resource for the widest range of people both directly and indirectly.

The main priority for the NeLH is to help the NHS achieve its objectives. However, it is also aimed at those healthcare professionals who are working in the private sector where common standards should apply. For example, the National Screening Committee is not only an NHS advisory committee, but its mission is also to promote the health of the whole population and its recommendations are relevant to the private sector. Part of the content of the NeLH such as Clinical Evidence and Cochrane Library is licensed from commercial providers. There are two other groups of health and care professionals whose needs will also be met by the NeLH – those working in public health and in social care. The National Electronic Library for Public Health is intended for all public health professionals, many of whom work in local government. It has been developed by the Health Development Agency.

[www.nelh.nhs.uk/new\\_users.asp](http://www.nelh.nhs.uk/new_users.asp)

[www.phel.gov.uk/](http://www.phel.gov.uk/)

# Promoting Learning about Acutely Ill People

---

## Work-based learning – in primary care

Specialty registrars must gain experience in emergency care, which is a feature of both in-hours and out-of-hours work. Because there are particular features of the out-of-hours period that require a specific educational focus, such as isolation, the relative lack of supporting services and the need for proper self-care, it is important that they spend time in the out-of-hours primary care work environment.

The specialty registrar should work in the local out-of-hours service, under supervision, in order to gain competence and confidence in delivery of these services. They should be supported by their GP trainer, who should make arrangements, as part of their initial educational planning with the specialty registrar, for their sessions with the out-of-hours service provider. This should follow an evaluation of the specialty registrar's level of knowledge, skill and learning needs.

There are a number of organisations involved in the delivery of primary care out-of-hours services, including GP co-ops, commercial deputising services, NHS Direct, NHS 24, nurse triage, minor injury centres, primary care walk-in centres, accident and emergency departments and some remaining individual practices and practitioners. The model of service provided is varied, but there will be a need for partnership and collaboration between all agencies at the local level. Exposure to a variety of community-based emergency and out-of-hours models should be provided for specialty registrars as part of their training programme.

## Work-based learning – in secondary care

The hospital environment is ideal for seeing concentrated groups of acutely ill children and adults. All doctors entering general practice training programmes will have acquired the competences in acute care laid down in the *Curriculum for Foundation Programmes*.

Many doctors will have acquired additional competences during their hospital training before entering GP training. Some GP training programmes will contain placements of varying length in acute medicine and in accident and emergency departments that are ideal environments for learning about acutely ill people and their management. While cardiopulmonary resuscitation skills will have been taught in the Foundation Programme or equivalent, it is important to maintain those skills once in practice. Hospital resuscitation departments are excellent learning resources for keeping up to date with those skills.

## Non-work-based learning

All specialty registrars should have access to cardiopulmonary resuscitation courses and learning resources to help them address their learning needs.

## Learning with other healthcare professionals

Teamwork is essential for the effective management of acutely ill patients in primary and secondary care. In primary care, it is vital that all members of the primary healthcare team understand their roles in managing acutely ill patients and contribute to the development of practice guidelines.

Acute events are an important source of material for significant event analyses and team members should be encouraged to participate in these and learn from them at both the individual and team level. Working in the out-of-hours environment will help the specialty registrar gain valuable experience of working and learning in multiprofessional settings, which will include GPs, nurses, paramedics, accident and emergency staff, etc.

# Appendix 1

---

## COGPED position paper on out-of-hours training for specialty registrars (GP), 2004

### Introduction

This paper sets out the Committee of General Practice Education Directors' (COGPED) position on the way in which specialty registrars are to continue to obtain experience in out-of-hours care where their GP trainers' practices have transferred responsibility for providing out-of-hours services.

COGPED has consulted with the main stakeholders in this process, including the General Practitioners Committee (GPC), the Royal College of General Practitioners (RCGP) and the Joint Committee on Postgraduate Training for General Practice (JCPTGP), the National Association of GP Cooperatives and the Department of Health (DH), to seek their views throughout the development of this paper. The preliminary response has been very positive and extensive constructive comments have been made by the GPC and RCGP, GP postgraduate deaneries and others, which are reflected in this paper with the intention of modifying it further in the light of experience and development of the out-of-hours services in the months and years ahead.

COGPED will continue to liaise with representatives from the GPC, specialty registrars' subcommittee of GPC, RCGP, providers of out-of-hours organisations, JCPTGP, DH and PCOs to review and consider all issues of importance in the future for out-of-hours training of specialty registrars.

### Background

The delivery of out-of-hours services, and the nature of the work, has changed over the past few years. As the new GMS contract comes into place, many GP trainers will choose to transfer the responsibility for out-of-hours work. In this situation steps must be taken to ensure that their specialty registrars are not placed at a disadvantage. The strong view of all the organisations contributing to this document is that the generalist role of the GP should be maintained and that newly accredited GPs will be expected to have demonstrated their ability to perform competently in out-of-hours primary care.

It is still the responsibility of the GP postgraduate deaneries to ensure that out-of-hours experience occurs in training and for the competent authority to be satisfied that all generalist competences have been successfully assessed in order for a certificate of completion to be issued.

There is general agreement that the out-of-hours changes in the new GMS contract are among the first in a series of probable radical changes in the way that GMS is delivered. The out-of-hours position itself is likely to alter rapidly over the next five years, and with the development of emergency care pathways in the NHS this will have a significant impact on the primary care out-of-hours services.

The new GP contract defines core services and when fully implemented will allow almost all practices to transfer responsibility for out of hours. Between 1 April 2004 and 31 December 2004, practices were able to transfer responsibility for out of hours where this was part of the PCO strategy. From 31 December 2004 PCOs were able to take full responsibility for making sure there was effective out-of-hours provision and, except in very exceptional circumstances, should have taken on responsibility for out-of-hours care from those practices who wished to transfer that responsibility. Some PCOs took on responsibility from 1 April 2004,

which is the earliest possible date. The UK health departments are currently working with the strategic health authorities (SHAs) and PCOs [NB: PCO is the generic term that covers English and Scottish Health Boards, Welsh LHBs and the Northern Ireland equivalent] to scope alternative arrangements for out-of-hours provision, with an expectation that most practices will have chosen to transfer responsibility by 1 January 2005.

It is important to clarify that whilst most GPs wish to transfer the responsibility for out-of-hours work they are not giving up the option of being able to do it. It is likely that for a period of time there will be significant variability in the arrangements for providing out of hours in the UK.

Early indications are that at least 90% of practices will transfer responsibility as soon as they are able to do so and that the responsibility will pass to the PCOs who will contract for the delivery of this care from a range of agencies, including reconstituted cooperatives and commercial services, or provide this directly themselves.

It is anticipated that, with the progressive development of various patient care pathways, including emergency care, in the NHS over the next five years regular reviews will be needed on the delivery of out-of-hours training for specialty registrars. In addition the implication of the European Working Time Directive must be taken into account for specialty registrars. This has been in place since August 2004. However, it is unlikely, at least initially, that this will impact significantly on the training for specialty registrars.

The ideas and competences presented in this paper are based upon the recently published article (McLean and Houghton)<sup>3</sup> that is fully endorsed by COGPED. COGPED supports the position of the generalist role and defining the competences that should be in place. In order to develop the out-of-hours training programme COGPED has facilitated the involvement and agreement of all the appropriate organisations and stakeholders in the provision of out-of-hours primary care.

## Definitions

*Out of Hours Service:* the new contract (nGMS) has defined the normal working day for general practice to be between 08.00 and 18.30 on all weekdays except public holidays. Thus, out of hours is defined as that work undertaken between 18.30–08.00 and all day at weekends and on public holidays. However, for the purpose of this paper, out of hours is also taken to mean the type and style of working that takes place in this time.

This paper recognises that the processes for providing general practice and primary care, both during the normal working day and outside, have changed over the last decade and these processes provide different models of working, requiring different knowledge and competences by GPs. It is important to make clear that these do not just refer to the management of emergencies, but also to the experience of dealing with patient contacts in a different quantity and context from the normal working day. In other words, emergency care is a feature of both in-hours and out-of-hours work but there are particular features of the out-of-hours period, such as isolation, the relative lack of supporting services and the need for proper self-care, that require a specific educational focus.

*Educational supervision of the specialty registrar:* this is usually carried out by the GP trainer, who undertakes overall supervision of the individual's learning experiences, manages the process, commissions learning opportunities and is responsible for the delivery of formative assessment and preparing the specialty registrar for the summative assessment processes. Others may provide the educational supervisor with data to inform formative assessments, appraisal, and the completion of the Structured Trainer's Report.

*Clinical supervision:* this may vary according to the learning situation. At its most basic, clinical supervision is a clinical governance issue ensuring the quality of care and patients' safety. In this context it is taken to mean this, as well as the supervision of a specialty registrar's learning and experience. In some areas the clinical supervisor is called an associate or assistant trainer (and in secondary care a consultant trainer). It is likely that postgraduate GP deaneries will need to develop and monitor the competences of the clinical supervisors for this role, as well as clarifying the requirements of the job for the out-of-hours provider organisation.

It is desirable for the clinical supervisor to have additional skills to that of being a proficient professional and these will include the ability to teach, observe, assess and feedback to learners. The clinical supervisor could be a clinician who is beginning the process of becoming a trainer. When it comes to the delivery of training in specific skills in particular, clinical supervisors need not necessarily always be GPs. However, with the overall context of the specialty registrars' training firmly in mind, postgraduate deaneries will want to ensure that expe-

rienced GPs retain an appropriate and significant input into out-of-hours training for specialty registrars. Those doctors already approved as GP trainers by their postgraduate GP deaneries will be automatically deemed qualified to supervise specialty registrars.

Formal lines of communication between GP trainers, out-of-hours clinical supervisors and those involved in clinical skills training will need to be established to deliver continuity of information and feedback to ensure the validity of the trainer's assessment of each specialty registrars.

*The assessment systems:* these must be fit for a range of purposes. The methods used within the programme will be selected in the light of the purpose and content of that component of the assessment framework. Methods will be chosen on the basis of validity, reliability, feasibility, cost-effectiveness, opportunities for feedback and impact on learning. For example, work-based assessment must be subject to reliability and validity measures. Evidence must be collected and documented systematically. This paper indicates that the assessment of the specialty registrars will remain the responsibility of the trainer, supported by evidence supplied by the specialty registrars, which will include his or her own self-assessments and that provided by a range of clinical supervisors.

The GP trainer would be in receipt of written evidence and formative feedback from clinical supervisors in the out-of-hours organisation that would allow the trainer to monitor and assess the specialty registrar's competences in this aspect of the training, and eventually sign off the registrar as appropriately competent. In some instances the demonstration of some of the skills and competences needed for out-of-hours care could also take place during the normal working day, and could be signed off by the GP trainer from personal assessment. The quality assurance of all aspects of training would remain the responsibility of the JCPTGP via the GP postgraduate deaneries.

### **Expectation of GP postgraduate deaneries**

The postgraduate GP deaneries will expect all specialty registrars to obtain the necessary out-of-hours experience and training. Where the practice has not transferred responsibility for out-of-hours services, responsibility for providing the experience and supervision of out-of-hours training for the specialty registrar would remain with that practice. However, where training practices have transferred responsibility for out-of-hours services, delegated arrangements for supervision would be made with the out-of-hours service providers, who will develop locally agreed criteria with the directors of postgraduate GP education for training and the appointment of clinical supervisors. In some circumstances, if the trainer is maintaining some out-of-hours commitment but not responsibility, this could be the specialty registrar's usual GP trainer.

Formal feedback of each specialty registrar in the development of their out-of-hours competences would be made on a regular basis (at least three times during the year) and this evidence would inform the GP trainer's decision-making in signing off the trainer's report. The aim of the training is to enable specialty registrars to learn, develop, practice and maintain their competences in out-of-hours working.

As an indicative benchmark of the time required to achieve those competences, it is likely that one session, at a suitable clinical intensity, per month will be necessary or the equivalent in an appropriate and negotiated combination of sessions. In some instances, the GP trainer, in agreement with the specialty registrar, may indicate that additional time in this experience is required so that the competences can be signed off. However, as training becomes increasingly focused on the acquisition of competences, arbitrary definitions of time as markers of completion of any part of training will become less reliable and relevant. Specialty registrars will be responsible for keeping completed records of experience and feedback on all sessions that they attend in a workbook as evidence of their competences in out-of-hours training.

### **The key out-of-hours competences and their assessment**

Specialty registrars would have to demonstrate competence in the provision of out-of-hours care. The overall responsibility for assessment of competence is with the GP trainer but specialty registrars have a duty to keep the record of their experience, self-assessment and feedback in the competence domains.

The six generic competences are defined as the:

- 1 Ability to manage common medical, surgical and psychiatric emergencies in the out of hours setting
- 2 Understanding of the organisational aspects of NHS out-of-hours care

- 3 Ability to make appropriate referrals to hospitals and other professionals in the out-of-hours setting
- 4 Demonstration of communication skills required for out-of-hours care.
- 5 Individual personal time and stress management
- 6 Maintenance of *personal security and awareness and management of the security risks to others.*

### **Provision of Out of Hours Services**

There are a number of organisations involved in the delivery of Out of Hours Services, including GP co-ops, commercial deputising services, NHS Direct, NHS 24, nurse triage, minor injury centres, primary care walk-in centres, A&E departments and some remaining individual practices and practitioners. The model of service provided will be of necessity varied, but there will be a need for partnership and collaboration between all agencies at the local level. This will be driven and shaped by a national quality standards process. It is expected that the service will follow care pathways and patient journey/s, delivered in multiprofessional settings, which will include GPs, nurses, paramedics, A&E staff, etc.

There will be a strong likelihood of consortia forming to serve this need. It is necessary to encourage collaboration and cooperation to ensure the success of the service. Many models of service will have a place and should be expected and able to offer training for specialty registrars.

### **The role of Primary Care Organisations**

PCOs will be required to secure out-of-hours services, either from appropriate organisations or consortia of organisations or by direct provision. The PCOs will also have responsibility for the recruitment of competent GPs (as generalists who have adequate experience in the provision of out-of-hours services) to serve in this area. Although the consensus opinion at present is that the element of the out-of-hours service best provided by GPs is that derived from their training and experience as clinical generalists it is inevitable that changes and developments will occur and PCOs might consider the development of practitioners with special interests, including GPwSIs, in the area of out-of-hours provision, not only to enhance the quality of the service but also as part of the overlying strategy for the retention of GPs.

PCOs will need to ensure that the out-of-hours service includes the provision of appropriate training for GPs in training. The PCOs are encouraged to work closely with the GP postgraduate deaneries in assuring the quality of training in the out-of-hours organisations.

### **The role of GP postgraduate deaneries**

When commissioning services, PCTs will need to reassure themselves that the provider will not only deliver high-quality out-of-hours care, but also has the capacity and capability to deliver the required training for specialty registrars. They will also need to ensure that the provider complies with the quality assurance processes of the GP training programme delivered by each deanery.

The deanery will need to work with PCTs and providers to develop mechanisms to ensure that suitable quality training is available and that incentives are in place to encourage and support the provider in delivering and monitoring the training.

The quality assurance of the GP training programme in out of hours will include assessment of:

- The post holder's educational plan, progress report and monitoring processes, and the process for assessment of competences (all to be documented)
- The post's level of workload, educational facilities and the overall quality of the learning environment
- The clinical supervisor's ability (which must include skills in observation and the ability to give feedback)
- The capability and capacity of the out-of-hours organisation in delivery of the clinical supervisory process.

It is essential that specialty registrars keep documented evidence of achieved competences and experience that will include their own self-assessment, the feedback from clinical supervisors and any formal or informal comments made by others appropriately involved in the process.

In order to support the skills of the out-of-hours clinical supervisors the GP postgraduate deaneries will pro-

vide programmes of training and skills development for them. The GP postgraduate deanery, in consultation with PCOs, may provide an ongoing development programme as part of professional development of clinical supervisors.

### **Educational materials**

The workbook and record of sessions are suggested as a possible model, and will not be compulsory. However, a nationally agreed model could be available electronically that could operate similarly to that for GP appraisal and allow both specialty registrars and GP trainers to access records easily.

### **The role of GP trainers**

GP trainers will remain expected to sign off the trainer's report using the written evidence provided by the workbook and to provide the assessment of their specialty registrars in the competences that have been recorded with the help of out-of-hours clinical supervisors. It may be useful for trainers to use a range of assessment methods in a range of settings, for example simulated surgeries, telephone triage sessions and CPR training, as they feel appropriate.

GP trainers should make arrangements, as part of their initial educational planning with the specialty registrars, for their sessions with the out-of-hours service. This should take place at a time agreed by the trainer and specialty registrar, following a clear evaluation of the specialty registrar's level of skill and competence, and their learning needs. The trainer should also ensure that the specialty registrar gets adequate exposure to community-based emergency and out-of-hours care, as part of their negotiated sessions.

### **The responsibility of specialty registrars**

Specialty registrars would work in the out-of-hours services, under supervision, in order to gain competence and confidence in delivery of these services, as required as a necessary part of becoming registered as GPs. The work of specialty registrars in acquiring out-of-hours competences will be as part of their normal contract of employment.

### **The role of the Out of Hours Service**

Out-of-hours providers will need to continue to have service input from doctors trained in, and certified for, general practice work. Each out-of-hours provider will be different and they will face different challenges that will impact on their ability to support and deliver out-of-hours training. An example will be differences between urban and rural settings. It is essential that the deaneries and PCOs work with the providers to understand the challenges that face them all. The out-of-hours providers are in a good position to provide a range of training opportunities and the deaneries must work with them to develop this resource, including addressing the delivery of clinical supervision and written and oral feedback to both specialty registrar and GP trainer. It will also be necessary to consider any financial implications of providing this training.

The out-of-hours organisation would provide the clinical supervision and written and oral feedback to both specialty registrar and GP trainer, and in doing so has an opportunity of promoting participation in out-of-hours work to the future workforce. In order to support this, the out-of-hours clinical supervisors will receive appropriate training commissioned or provided by the GP postgraduate deaneries. It will also be important to ensure that clinical supervisors have adequate time to debrief the specialty registrar.

### **The role of the PCO**

The PCO would need to ensure that each out-of-hours provider is able to provide the necessary training opportunities, has a sufficient number of trained clinical supervisors in its organisation and that these supervisors are appropriately trained and supported. The PCOs are encouraged to consult with their GP postgraduate deaneries in advance of commissioning the out-of-hours services.

## Sessions in out of hours

The number of sessions worked by a specialty registrar to acquire the necessary competences will vary according to the number of patients covered but, in an urban setting, is likely to require a indicative benchmark of a six-hour session every four weeks, adjusted in other settings on a *pro rata* basis. It is likely that organisations will form to provide cover for similar numbers of the population, but, as variations will occur, each GP trainer and each GP postgraduate deanery will, focusing on the acquisition of the required competences, need to assess the provision of experience for each individual specialty registrar.

The education value of experience gained in putting acquired competences into practice is recognised and the purpose of having an indicative number of sessions worked by specialty registrars, even if they can demonstrate the competences, is that these sessions would increase the experience and exposure to different aspects of out-of-hours work, particularly if they are undertaken in a wide variety of out-of-hours settings. The negotiation of this is an issue for all involved organisations and GP trainers.

However, allowing for a necessary period of induction into general practice and primary care for specialty registrars, the indicative benchmark of 12 sessions is likely to be necessary over the (normal) specialty registrar year. The number of hours worked in any week would also have to comply with the European Working Time Directive. Furthermore, out-of-hours work should not be undertaken the night before any organised educational activity, and trainers will need to be aware of this. It is desirable that specialty registrars have experience of different models and shift times of the out-of-hours service, but a specialty registrar who works an overnight session should have the following day off.

Although the out-of-hours training should be distributed throughout the time as a specialty registrar it would also be possible for the specialty registrar to have two separate weeks, for example one week in the first six-month period and one week in the last part of their GP training year. However, there are serious potential disadvantages to this pattern that risk distorting the overall training experience and such an option should probably be regarded as an exception chosen for compelling reasons.

Exposure to a variety of community-based emergency and out-of-hours models should be provided for specialty registrars as part of their training programme. This should be acknowledged and negotiated with the GP trainer, as part of the specialty registrar's PDP.

## Medico-legal

The specialty registrars will be subject to the normal processes of clinical governance, GMC regulations and civil law. Their contract of employment is likely, for the foreseeable near future, to remain with the training practice or their GP trainer, but they may be supervised by a clinician who may not be from that practice or, on occasions, a professional who may not be a doctor but who will be an approved clinical supervisor in out-of-hours care.

In the context of out-of-hours training, medical indemnity organisations have indicated that a specialty registrar's standard membership will provide them with indemnity for the work they undertake as part of out-of-hours training.

As the situation continues to evolve and as new models are developed there will be an ongoing need to keep the situation regarding medical indemnity under review and out-of-hours providers will need to ensure that their insurance is adequate to cover their own liabilities in connection with the work done for them by specialty registrars.

## Review

COGPED recognises that the process and structures for delivering out-of-hours care are going through rapid and fragmentary change; thus the processes for delivering training for out-of-hours care for specialty registrars will require regular formal review and further consultation after the first year. To this end, the steering group of appropriate stakeholders should continue to exist and meet regularly.

## Further reading

- [www.nosa.org.uk/downloads/doc/Trainers%20Report.doc](http://www.nosa.org.uk/downloads/doc/Trainers%20Report.doc) [accessed January 2007]
- BMA GENERAL MEDICAL SERVICES COMMITTEE (GMSC). *GP Registrars: out-of-hours work and education for the future, guidance for GPs* London: British Medical Association, 1998
- BRITISH MEDICAL ASSOCIATION. *New GMS Contract: investing in general practice* London: British Medical Association, 2003
- BAROT (Bury & Rochdale Oldham & Tameside). *Guidelines for Out of Hours*, 2002
- TAYLOR E, HOUGHTON G, KELLY S, CAMPBELL I. Training registrars in general practice: education and service for the future workforce *Education for Primary Care* 2003; 14(3): 310–16
- [www.jcptgp.org.uk/policy/policy\\_hours\\_training.asp](http://www.jcptgp.org.uk/policy/policy_hours_training.asp)
- JOINT COMMITTEE FOR POSTGRADUATE TRAINING FOR GENERAL PRACTICE. *The Selection and Re-Selection of GP Trainers 2001* London: JCPTGP, 2001
- LONGHURST S, SHIPMAN C, DALE J. Working out of hours: the experiences and training needs of general practitioner registrars *Br J Gen Pract* 1998; 48(430): 1247–8
- MCLEAN I AND HOUGHTON G. Training for out of hours or out of hours training? A new set of skills for general practice *Education for Primary Care* 2004; 15(1): 1–9
- [www.gpkss.ac.uk/vti/train\\_info/pdfs/OOHguide.pdf](http://www.gpkss.ac.uk/vti/train_info/pdfs/OOHguide.pdf)
- [www.show.scot.nhs.uk/scpmde/west/gp/traineroutofhours.htm](http://www.show.scot.nhs.uk/scpmde/west/gp/traineroutofhours.htm)
- [www.wessex.org.uk/medical/genpract/tmanual/appb.htm](http://www.wessex.org.uk/medical/genpract/tmanual/appb.htm)
- [www.doh.gov.uk/workingtime/guidance.htm](http://www.doh.gov.uk/workingtime/guidance.htm)
- GPC/RCGP. *Good Medical Practice for General Practitioners* London: Royal College of General Practitioners, 2002
- DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH. *The NHS (Vocational Training for General Medical Practice) Regulations* London: Department of Health, 1997
- NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF GP CO-OPERATIVES. *Recommendations on Registrars*
- NORTH WEST DEANERY. *Out of Hours Experience for GP registrars – regional review and guidelines*, 1998
- PMETB SUB GROUP ON ASSESSMENT. *Principles and Standards for an Assessment System for Postgraduate Medical Training* London: PMETB, 2003
- SOUTH EAST SCOTLAND DEANERY. *Out of Hours Guidelines for GP registrars*

The following individuals and organisations have contributed in writing this position paper:

- Dr D Blaney, GP Director, South East Scotland GP Deanery
- Dr R Chapman, GP, GPC member, representing JCPTGP
- Dr A Hibble, GP Director, Eastern GP Deanery
- Dr G Houghton, Education Adviser, representing RCGP
- Dr I McLean, Deputy GP Dean, Kent, Surrey and Sussex, GP, representing UKCEA
- Dr Beth McCarron-Nash, GP, GPC
- Dr Jane Mamelock, North West Deanery
- Professor S Murray, GP Director, West of Scotland GP Deanery
- Mr R Rook, on behalf of David Carson, for Department of Health out-of-hours implementation team
- Professor A Tavabie, Vice-chair of COGPED, GP Dean, Kent, Surrey and Sussex
- Dr Craig Wheelans, GPR Sub-Committee of GPC

*Revised November 2004.*

# Appendix 2

---

## Acute care competences from Foundation Years 1 and 2

### 1 Promptly assesses the acutely ill or collapsed patient:

- Assesses conscious level, responsiveness
- Ensures airway is supported and cleared
- Observes respiratory pattern and rate, identifies inadequate ventilation
- Assesses pulse rate, rhythm, volume
- Measures blood pressure using automated methods or sphygmomanometer
- Completes initial assessment within 2–3 minutes
- Identifies and attempts to correct circulatory failure appropriately
- Identifies oliguria, checks for common causes, intervenes appropriately
- Administers oxygen safely, monitors efficacy
- Attempts to ensure a clear airway
- Calls for help early.

### 2 Identifies and responds to acutely abnormal physiology:

- Interprets abnormal vital signs correctly in context
- Anticipates and prevents deterioration in vital signs
- Recognises patients at risk including those with chronic and co-morbid disease
- Investigates causes of abnormal vital signs
- Makes a clinical assessment of adequacy of cardiac output and oxygen delivery
- Capable of leading multidisciplinary team
- Helps others stay calm
- Considers and ensures relatives (if present) are being supported.

### 3 Where appropriate, delivers a fluid challenge safely to an acutely ill patient:

- Selects an appropriate fluid for intravenous resuscitation
- Sets up fluid administration giving-set correctly
- Administers fluid bolus(es), observes response, ensures continued administration with monitoring of effect to desired end points
- Identifies hypokalaemia and chooses a safe and effective method of potassium supplementation with monitoring of response

- Reviews impact of fluid administration on organ system function
- Considers additional electrolyte replacement requirements
- Considers the restraints of volume in young people, based on weight.

#### **4 Reassesses ill patients appropriately after initiation of treatment:**

- Implements a system of regular checking of unstable patients
- Calls for help if patient does not respond to initial measures
- Makes patient safety a priority
- Provides clear guidance to colleagues about monitoring
- Supports nursing staff in designing and implementing monitoring or calling criteria
- Ensures communications to relatives, if not present, are carried out by someone competent to advise on progress.

#### **5 Requests senior or more experienced help when appropriate:**

- Analyses clinical problems, considers possible causes and solutions
- Calls for help or advice appropriately
- Demonstrates understanding of the team approach to care of the acutely ill
- Prioritises problems
- Puts the patient first
- Demonstrates to seniors appropriate judgement in handling acute medical situations.

#### **6 Undertakes a secondary survey to establish differential diagnosis:**

- Demonstrates recognitions of the importance of iterative review
- Demonstrates competent history-taking and clinical examination in acute clinical situations
- Arranges appropriate basic laboratory tests, interprets results
- Recognises that the acute illness may be an acute exacerbation of a chronic disease
- Identifies co-morbid diseases
- Undertakes further focused history-taking in difficult circumstances and/or when patient unable to cooperate
- Rapidly identifies clinical signs, links them to the history to form a differential diagnosis
- Plans appropriate investigations to confirm or refute a diagnosis and considers alternative diagnostic scenarios as they emerge
- Recognises the modifying effect of chronic or co-morbid disease and its treatment on the presentation of acute illness.

#### **7 Obtains an arterial blood gas sample safely, interprets results correctly:**

- Takes an arterial sample in an adult safely using a heparinised syringe
- Describes common causes of abnormal values
- Interprets results in context
- Documents results clearly in the case record
- Takes appropriate initial action to correct abnormalities in acid-base balance and blood gas results
- Communicates significant acid-base disturbances to others in the team

- Directs corrective measures appropriately.

#### **8 Manages patients with impaired consciousness including convulsions:**

- Appreciates urgency of the situation
- Administers oxygen, protects airway in unconscious patient
- Places unconscious patient in recovery position
- Calls for help if fitting does not respond to immediate measures
- Follows local protocols reliably
- Seeks and corrects abnormalities of physiological signs, particularly hypoxaemia, hypotension, hypoglycaemia and electrolyte disturbances
- Questions and discusses scientific content of protocols in use
- Warns patients about the legal implications regarding fitness to drive.

#### **9 Safely and effectively uses common analgesic drugs:**

- Evaluates the patient in pain
- Makes patient comfort a priority
- Prescribes opioid and non-opioid analgesic drugs safely
- Re-evaluates the efficacy of analgesia in a timely manner
- Monitors patients for common side effects of analgesic drugs
- Safely uses anti-emetic drugs to treat or prevent nausea and vomiting
- Aware of the risk of addiction to pain-relieving medication
- Considers the effect of hepatic and renal dysfunction on analgesic pharmacology
- Assesses the effect of prescribed analgesia in a timely manner
- Considers that analgesia may temporarily mask the severity of illness.

#### **10 Understands and applies the principles of managing a patient following self-harm:**

- Undertakes a focused history, including psychosocial causes requiring social services or police intervention
- Knows how to access Toxbase and does so when necessary
- Recognises the need for involvement of mental health or more experienced personnel
- Demonstrates tolerance and understanding
- Performs a mental state assessment
- Demonstrates an awareness of child protection concerns where appropriate
- Protects and supports colleagues where appropriate
- Anticipates necessary steps to minimise risks to patient
- Initiates referral to mental health services where appropriate.

#### **11 Understands and applies the principles of management of a patient with an acute confusional state or psychosis:**

- Recognises diagnostic features of psychosis and acute confusional states
- Summons experienced help promptly
- Discusses safe administration of anti-psychotic drugs including the risks of sedation
- Knows the provisions of the Mental Health Act and can apply them appropriately

- Protects patient, self and colleagues from harm
- Safely administers anti-psychotic drugs
- Considers underlying causes of acute confusional state or psychosis.

**12 Ensures safe continuing care of patients on handover between shifts, on call staff or with ‘hospital at night’ team by meticulous attention to detail and reflection on performance:**

- Accurately summarises the main points of patients’ diagnoses, active problems and management plans
- Provides clear information to colleagues
- Attends handovers punctually and accepts directions and allocation of tasks from seniors
- Focuses on teamwork and reflects on the team performance
- Supports colleagues in forward planning at handover
- Can and sometimes does organise handover, briefing and task allocation
- Anticipates potential problems for next shift and takes pre-emptive action.

**13 Considers appropriateness of interventions according to patients’ wishes, severity of illness and chronic or co-morbid diseases:**

- Efficiently extracts information from history and examination that would influence treatment decisions
- Seeks information from relatives if appropriate
- Discusses factors influencing the use of do not attempt resuscitation (DNAR) decisions
- Has balanced view of benefits and harms of medical treatment
- Identifies patients for whom resuscitation or advanced care might be inappropriate and takes advice from senior colleagues
- Demonstrates sensitivity in the planning of complex ethical decisions
- Negotiates management plan with patient
- Respects patients’ wishes when dealing with relatives.

**14 Has completed appropriate level of resuscitation training:**

- Successfully trained to the standard of Advanced Life Support (ALS).

**15 Discusses DNAR orders/advance directives appropriately:**

- Understands the criteria for issuing orders, and the level of experience required to issue them
- Can discuss with colleagues, including nurses, and observes or participates in discussions with relatives
- Facilitates the regular review of DNAR decisions and understands actions required if decision is challenged
- Discusses the DNAR criteria and their legal framework with colleagues, including nurses, and relatives
- Encourages regular review of the order and takes appropriate action if challenged
- Is aware of any conflict that may exist between patients and their relatives, and of cultural and other factors that might be at work
- Describes the impact of chronic or co-morbid disease on patient outcomes.

## **16 Requests and deals with common investigations appropriately:**

- Requests common investigations appropriately for patients' needs
- Discusses risks, possible outcomes and later results with patients<sup>ii</sup> appropriately to level of expertise
- Recognises normal and abnormal results
- Prioritises importance of results and asks for help appropriately
- Ensures results are available in a timely fashion
- Supports F1 trainees or students in making appropriate requests for, interpretation of, and action on normal and abnormal results, for common investigations
- Understands local systems and asks for help appropriately from the relevant individuals.

<sup>ii</sup> carers, relatives, supporters or advocates

## Appendix 3

---

### ‘Dangerous’ diagnoses

There are certain conditions that demand urgent action when the merest suspicion of them crosses a doctor’s mind. Problems occur where a doctor has correctly suspected such a diagnosis, recorded the fact, but then not acted on the possibility.

Diagnoses that fall into this category include:

- myocardial infarction
- pulmonary embolus
- subarachnoid haemorrhage
- appendicitis
- limb ischaemia
- intestinal obstruction or perforation
- meningitis
- aneurysms
- ectopic pregnancy
- acute psychosis/mania
- visual problems that could lead to blindness including retinal detachment and haemorrhage as well as systemic disease such as temporal arteritis, which if not recognised has serious complications.

If you suspect a potentially life-threatening diagnosis in a primary care setting, then *act as if the diagnosis were certain* and send the patient rapidly to his or her nearest secondary care centre. You may well get it wrong and appear to be over-cautious, but this is a call it’s often impossible to make without the benefit of investigations and close observation.

*Source:* Medical Protection Society<sup>9</sup>

## References

---

- 1 BRITISH MEDICAL ASSOCIATION. *New GMS Contract: investing in general practice* London: British Medical Association, 2003
- 2 COMMITTEE OF GENERAL PRACTICE EDUCATION DIRECTORS. *Out of Hours (OOH) Training for GP Registrars* London: COGPED, 2004, [www.cogped.org.uk/document\\_store/1139305073itpm\\_out\\_of\\_hours\\_position\\_paper.doc](http://www.cogped.org.uk/document_store/1139305073itpm_out_of_hours_position_paper.doc) [accessed January 2007]
- 3 MCLEAN I AND HOUGHTON G. Training for out of hours or out of hours training? A new set of skills for general practice *Education for Primary Care* 2004; 15(1): 1–9
- 4 ROYAL COLLEGE OF GENERAL PRACTITIONERS. *Morbidity Statistics from General Practice Fourth National Study 1991–2* London: HMSO, 1995
- 5 DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH. *Modernising Medical Careers, the Next Steps* London: Department of Health, 2004
- 6 DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH. *National Service Framework for Coronary Heart Disease* London: Department of Health, 2000
- 7 DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH. *Improving the Management of Patients with Mental Ill Health in Emergency Settings* London: Department of Health, 2004
- 8 DEPARTMENTS OF HEALTH OF THE UNITED KINGDOM. *The Curriculum for the Foundation Years in Postgraduate Education and Training* London: Department of Health, 2005
- 9 MEDICAL PROTECTION SOCIETY. *Casebook Vol. 13 No. 3* London: Medical Protection Society, 2005

