



Home Office



Department of

Justice

An Roinn Dlí agus Cirt

Mánnystrie O tha Laa

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# Guidance on the provision of welfare advice and support: AG-004 for Forensic Pathologists

2024/25

## **Pathology Delivery Board and Department of Justice, Northern Ireland**

This guidance is primarily for those doctors with a prescribed connection to the designated bodies of the Home Office Pathology Delivery Board (PDB) and Department of Justice, Northern Ireland. All weblinks within this document were checked on the last review date.

Physical and mental health issues can affect a doctor's ability to carry out their duties as a forensic pathologist assisting the criminal justice system. This guidance seeks to provide advice to doctors wishing to bring their health concerns to their responsible officer and signpost sources of support. This may be especially helpful to doctors who are self-employed.

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## Associated documents

- Reflective Practice Form for Forensic Pathologists: [AF-002](#) – this can be used to reflect upon an event or experience.
- Work Leisure Balance Assessment Tool for Forensic Pathologists: [AF-009](#) - If you have any concerns about your physical or mental wellbeing, this form can be used to reflect upon your current work and home life, health and wellbeing.
- Reduction or Change in Practice Self-Assessment Form for Forensic Pathologists: [AF-010](#) – this form can be used if you are thinking of about reducing or changing your practice due to a period of extended leave.

## Handling instructions

1. The information compiled by the appraiser and/or responsible officer in the gathering of information about your physical or mental health problem should be treated as 'Official: Sensitive' or 'Private and confidential', as the information within the documentation contains personal data, subject to confidentiality requirements under the General Data Protection Regulation. This information should not be circulated further by the appraiser or responsible officer without prior approval from the data subject (you).
2. Further information and guidance for how the appraiser should handle personal data can be read in the Pathology Delivery Board's Privacy Information Notice, available at the following link:

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5f082732e90e0712c26c1ec7/PDB\\_Privacy\\_Information\\_Notice.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5f082732e90e0712c26c1ec7/PDB_Privacy_Information_Notice.pdf).

3. For information about how the Department of Justice, Northern Ireland protects and uses information held about the State Pathologist's Department, please read the Department's privacy policy, available here: <https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/publications/doj-privacy-notice>.

## Your responsibilities

4. Your responsibility, as a doctor with a prescribed connection to the Home Office Pathology Delivery Board (PDB) or the Department of Justice, Northern Ireland, is to inform your responsible officer, in confidence, that you are experiencing a physical or mental health concern that could affect your judgment or ability to carry out your clinical work. Examples include, but not limited to post traumatic stress, bullying, being subject to a GMC investigation, relationship issues, alcohol or substance abuse, debt or depression.
5. If you have not informed your responsible officer by the time of your appraisal, it is important that you bring this matter to the attention of your appraiser, preferably, before the meeting date. The appraiser may decide to delay your appraisal meeting in order to discuss the situation with you or seek your permission to refer the matter to your responsible officer.

## The responsibilities of the responsible officer

6. The responsible officer has an overriding duty to inform the appropriate organisation, should the issues raised by the doctor have the potential to adversely affect:
  - the doctor's ability to undertake their clinical duties,
  - the doctor's ability to work within the guidelines of good medical practice,
  - the criminal justice system (both reputationally and the management of a case).

## What to expect when you speak to your responsible officer

7. Your responsible officer is there to help you and has your best interests at heart. Good medical practice is followed at all times by your responsible officer who will be paying particular attention to treating you with kindness, courtesy and respect (see [Domain 3: paragraph 48](#)).
8. When you make contact with your responsible officer, they will record the date, time and the issue you raise with them and retain this in your confidential file. The conversation won't be recorded using a voice recorder unless you give express

consent for the conversation to be recorded. It is not normal practice for these conversations to be voice recorded.

9. Your responsible officer will always ask for your permission to discuss your issue with other medical professionals, colleagues, your designated body or other outside organisation.
10. You will be provided with advice of where your first point of [resources at hand](#) is, and [sources of support](#) for moving forward. Your potential sources of professional assistance will vary depending upon your employment status.
11. Your responsible officer will support you during this period by keeping in regular contact at intervals agreed with you; this could range from weekly, to monthly, to quarterly and so on; ensuring that you are gaining access to the appropriate service(s) that you require.
12. In the event that you require a period of suspension from normal clinical duties, your responsible officer will assist you in returning to clinical duties by putting in place any mentoring, supervision or staged return to work that is appropriate. This should be done in conjunction with your designated body.
13. This would be the appropriate time to consider filling in the 'Reduction or Change in Practice Self-Assessment Form for Forensic Pathologists: [AF-010](#)'.

## Things to consider when you speak to your responsible officer

14. If the problem that you wish to discuss with your responsible officer affects your clinical practice; your ability to follow the guidance in Good Medical Practice; or the criminal justice system, it may be something that your responsible officer has to discuss with your designated body, or your employer, or even the GMC.
15. Your responsible officer, in discussion with you, may consider that it is appropriate that you should self-suspend, or that you be suspended from clinical duties, for a set period of time, until it is appropriate for you to return to clinical duties.
16. If the problem you wish to discuss with your responsible officer, doesn't adversely affect the areas detailed in paragraph 13, your responsible officer may still consider that the matter should be discussed in confidence with a representative of your designated body. Alternatively, they may consider that the matter should be discussed with a more experienced responsible officer, medical professional, occupational health adviser or appropriately trained individual. As previously stated, written consent from you will be requested by your responsible officer before discussing your issue with any of these individuals or organisations discussed in this paragraph.

## Resources at hand

17. **Your General Practitioner** – all doctors will be advised to see their own GP to report new symptoms which may be unexplained or of concern. Good Medical Practice states that “If you are registered with a general practitioner this should be someone outside your family and your workplace”.
18. **Employer’s Occupational Health service** – for (NHS or university) employed doctors associated with the Home Office Pathology Delivery Board will be directed to their employer’s occupational health service.
19. **Northern Ireland Civil Service occupational health service** - for those employed by the Department of Justice, Northern Ireland they should be directed to the Northern Ireland Civil Service occupational health service. They can also be directed to Inspire (<https://www.inspirewellbeing.org/>), a charity who provide services related to workplace wellbeing, addiction and mental health matters across Ireland.
20. Additionally, self-employed doctors associated with the Home Office Pathology Delivery Board will be directed to ‘Sources of support’, below.

## Sources of support

21. **BMA Counselling and Doctor Advisor Service:** Confidential support for doctors in difficulty through professional counsellors and Doctor Advisors: [www.bma.org.uk/doctorsfordoctors](http://www.bma.org.uk/doctorsfordoctors)
22. **Doctors' Support Network:** Peer support group for doctors with a wide range of mental health problems: [www.dsn.org.uk](http://www.dsn.org.uk)
23. **NHS Practitioner health programme:** Confidential services for doctors with a mental health, addiction or physical health problem affecting their work. [www.php.nhs.uk](http://www.php.nhs.uk)
24. **Psychiatrists' Support Service:** A free, confidential support and advice service for members, trainee members and associates of the Royal College of Psychiatrists. [psychiatristssupportservice@rpsych.ac.uk](mailto:psychiatristssupportservice@rpsych.ac.uk)
25. **Sick Doctors Trust:** 24 hour confidential telephone helpline for doctors with drug and alcohol problems. [www.sick-doctors-trust.co.uk](http://www.sick-doctors-trust.co.uk)

## Further reading

26. The GMC website has a number of links to other resources, on its page entitled, ‘[Wellbeing resources for doctors](#)’, this includes services available across England and Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland, or both employed and self-employed doctors and medical students. There is also support for bereavement on this page.

27. This guidance can be read in conjunction with, [Good Medical Practice](#) – see ‘Domain 3: Colleagues, culture and safety, Managing risks posed by your health’, paragraph 77 – 80. Available here: <https://www.gmc-uk.org/professional-standards/professional-standards-for-doctors/good-medical-practice/domain-3-colleagues-culture-and-safety#managing-risks-posed-by-your-health-75660728FC784CF6B45B2546A365BCE6>.
28. [Section 35C\(2\) of the Medical Act 1983](#) as amended states that a doctor’s fitness to practise can be impaired by adverse physical or mental health.

## Contacts

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**END OF DOCUMENT**

This guidance document has been created and is managed by the Home Office Forensic Pathology Unit within the Home Office Science Directorate.

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