

Health Care and Associated Professions: Setting standards – proposals for consultation, 12 January 2010

Consumer Focus responded to the consultation by the Council for Healthcare Regulatory Excellence on the development of standards for the new General Pharmaceutical Council (GPhC), which is due to become operational in spring 2010.

The consultation includes standards on conduct, ethics and performance to which Consumer Focus has mostly restricted its comments to, these will affect the service customers receive from their local pharmacist.

Consumer Focus is the new statutory organisation campaigning for a fair deal for consumers in England, Wales, Scotland, and, for postal services, in Northern Ireland. We are the voice of consumers and work to secure a fair deal on their behalf. We were created through the merger of three consumer organisations – energywatch, Postwatch and the National Consumer Council (including the Welsh and Scottish Consumer Councils). The new approach allows for more coherent consumer advocacy, with a single organisation speaking with a powerful voice and able to more readily bring cross-sector expertise to issues of concern.

Under the section covering the general principles of the draft we answered the following questions:

Question 1

Do you agree that overall the standards adequately reflect an outcome and patient focussed, broad and flexible approach?

- Agree
- Disagree
- Unsure

Consumer Focus welcomes the clear patient-focus in the Draft Standards. By putting patients first the Draft Standards seek to ensure pharmacists provide a responsive service to customers.

On the issue of patient confidentiality Consumer Focus believes the Draft Standards should go further, setting out the need for patients to be provided with information on how their information will be stored as well as the circumstances in which it may be shared by the pharmacist. This includes who will have access to it and under what circumstances. It should also include how patients can view, amend or correct the information held about them.

Question 3

The GPhC is committed to embedding Equality and Diversity at the heart of everything it does. Do you think that the draft standards support this commitment?

- Agree
- Disagree
- Unsure

The Draft Standards do support GPhCs commitment to embedding Equality and Diversity but Consumer Focus is concerned at Question 8 in the consultation, regarding provision allowing registrants to withhold services according to their personal beliefs. This is in contradiction to the standards laid out in the Draft, and directly undermines the notion of a patient-focus within the standards.

Under the section covering conduct, ethics and performance we answered the following questions

Question 7

Do you think that the draft code of conduct, ethics and performance adequately applies to registered pharmacists and pharmacy technicians in all sectors of practice?

- Agree
- Disagree
- Unsure

All customers should receive high standards of service across all relevant sectors of pharmacy practice.

Question 8

Do you agree that there should be provision within the Code which allows personal beliefs of registrants to prevent them from providing a particular professional service? (subject to ensuring that patients and the public are referred to alternative providers of the service they require)?

- Agree
 Disagree
 Unsure

Consumer Focus believes that in a patient focused approach the balance of interest should be in favour of the patient. By creating a provision for withholding particular professional services based on the personal beliefs of the professional there is a danger that if there is too much concern for the personal beliefs of the professional, in some instances this will create a professional-centred rather than a patient-centred service.

Further, exemptions based on personal beliefs are clearly contrary to several points within the Draft Standards. The Draft Standards state safeguarding the well-being of patients must come ahead of registrants' personal beliefs. An exemption based on personal beliefs of the professional goes against the spirit of embedding equality and diversity the Draft Standards have sought to achieve. It is clearly in direct contradiction to the notion of respecting the dignity, rights and beliefs of patients if they are secondary to those of the pharmacist.

Consumer Focus recognises that where personal beliefs do influence the provision of services the General Medical Council guidance for doctors provides clear direction to practitioners and seeks to safeguard the interests of patients where this does happen. GMC guidance makes it clear that whatever the personal beliefs of doctors, their responsibility is to ensure that patients get the service which they need. The GPhC Standards should have equally detailed guidance to ensure that pharmacists may not withhold treatment to patients.

Where a registrant has beliefs which conflict with the objective of providing patient focused care, Consumer Focus does not believe they should be able to refer patients to neighbouring pharmacies without regard for how far patients will be forced to travel and how much time this will involve.

Lastly, the Draft Standards rightly commit registrants to listen to what patients want and this must be backed up by a meaningful, appropriate response based on professional competency and not the personal preferences of the provider. The Draft Standards, as a

forward looking document promoting equality and diversity and a patient focused approach should aim for the highest possible standards in developing the ethics of modern pharmacy practice.

Under the section covering continuing professional development we answered the following question

Question 18

Do you agree that registrants, regardless of their scope of practice, should record some CPD that relates to their ability to practise according to the GPhC standards of conduct, ethics and performance?

- Agree
- Disagree
- Unsure

Ethics change over time and standards of conduct and performance must evolve to meet those changes. Equally, the notion of patient focused services is changing too, as patients become more involved in the care and services they receive. As such ongoing CPD should reflect changes in how pharmacies operate to ensure services continue to be relevant and patient focused.