

# A Guide for GPs and Practice Managers responding to complaints made by patients through NHS England

## Top tips in two minutes on how to respond to a complaint

### Why?

1. You must respond promptly, fully and honestly to complaints and apologise when appropriate.
2. You must not allow a patient's complaint to adversely affect the care or treatment you provide or arrange (Good Medical Practice).
3. Although most complaints are dealt with, within the practice, complainants can direct their complaint to NHS England (NHSE).
4. NHSE will seek a response from the practice which will be reviewed by a Medical Advisor. This is to check:
  - There are no clinical concerns requiring further investigation
  - The response to the complainant by the practice answers all the complainant's points.
5. It is not unusual for NHSE to have to go back to practices for a further response. The common reasons for this are:
  - The questions (complaints) have not been fully answered
  - There has been reflection or evidence of learning either by individuals or by the practice

### How?

**Patients want an explanation, an apology and to know what steps have been taken to ensure it won't happen again. Your response letter needs to include:**

1. An apology and acknowledgement of distress suffered by the patient.
2. A summary of the issues raised by the patient – put these at the start of the letter so that you can check you have responded to all the issues raised.
3. What actions have been taken to investigate the complaint – describe the process (make sure that your process is proportionate to the seriousness of the complaint but don't be tempted to dismiss a seemingly spurious complaint – answer all complaints (fully).
4. Answer each of the points raised, saying how the point is being answered e.g. from review of the notes, memory, discussion, appointment log etc. Where possible, refer to local or national guidance.
5. Describe what action has been taken as a result of the complaint.
6. Describe your reflections as a GP/as a practice. How has this complaint been discussed in the team? What have you learnt? How will the issues raised be followed up – by individuals/by the wider team? Remember to note that the complaint will be discussed in your appraisal.
7. You should usually include an offer to meet the patient to discuss the complaint.
8. Apologise again.
9. Include details of how the patient can take the complaint further i.e. to the Ombudsman, if they are not satisfied with the response.

### What next?

Complaints are significant events so write the complaint up for discussion at clinical governance or other practice meetings

- Record, reflect on and discuss any learning that has resulted from the complaint and include these in your appraisal documents.

### What else?

Getting a complaint, however unjustified it may seem, may be very upsetting.

- Be familiar with your practice complaints procedure *before* you get a complaint.
- Make sure you support colleagues going through a complaint.
- Get support for yourself if you are going through a complaint.
- Review your response before sending to avoid saying anything that could cause further distress, aggravation or be misinterpreted.
- A good response is very time consuming to write but is likely to save time in the future.
- Try to regard letters of complaint as feedback of the patient's personal experience of the service they have received. They are an opportunity for service improvement and personal development.

### Web links:

NHS Complaints Policy <https://www.england.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/nhse-complaints-policy-june-2017.pdf>

MDU how to answer a complaint <https://www.themdu.com/guidance-and-advice/guides/how-to-respond-to-a-complaint>

MDU How to handle your first patient complaint <https://studentnotes.themdu.com/issue-archive/summer-2018/how-to-handle-your-first-patient-complaint>

AKESO Coaching & Mentoring Support for Doctors <http://akeso.org.uk>

