

PRESS RELEASE

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Survey shows the value of saying “sorry” in healthcare

20 December 2016: Doctors’ concerns about the implications of apologising to patients when things go wrong appear to be easing, according to research published by a leading medical protection organisation.

A survey of GPs by Medical Protection, found that 86% believe saying sorry can stop a complaint from escalating, 82% think an apology can help restore a good doctor/patient relationship, and 72% of GPs say they do not believe saying sorry is an admission of liability¹.

A similar YouGov survey of over 2000 members of the British public was commissioned, showing that an apology is also highly valued by patients. 76% said they would not be likely to make a complaint if the GP apologised about the issue they going to complain about².

Medical Protection says it has long advised its members that an appropriate apology is not an admission of liability, and that empathising with a patient when something has gone wrong can help avoid a complaint occurring or escalating. However, a challenging claims environment means doctors are in fear of litigation or being reported to the GMC and the misconception that apologising puts a doctor at greater risk of a complaint or claim has been difficult to quash³.

Dr Helen Hartley, Medicolegal Adviser at Medical Protection, said: “It is encouraging to see that doctors appreciate the benefits of apologising, and understand how saying sorry can reassure a patient when something has gone wrong. The public also clearly value an apology with 75% saying they were not likely to make a complaint about their doctor if they received one.

“We know that apologising to patients and their relatives following an adverse outcome can be difficult in practice. These are highly emotive conversations and the medicolegal environment is extremely challenging – doctors are in fear of being sued or being referred to the GMC and these fears can impact on the way they practise and communicate.

“But apologies can help prevent formal complaints occurring or escalating. Saying sorry is not an admission of liability; rather, it is an acknowledgment that something has gone wrong and a way of expressing empathy.

“The culture in healthcare should be one of openness and honesty so professionals feel they can apologise with confidence, learn from any mistakes that have contributed to an adverse patient outcome, and make improvements to minimise the risk of the same thing happening again. We will continue work with our members to provide advice and support, education and practical tools which help with communication and difficult conversations.”

End

For further information or to arrange an interview with Dr Hartley, please contact Stella Zegge, Medical Protection Press Officer on +44 (0)207 3991 409 or email or Kate Ison, Media Relations Manager on +44 (0)207 3991 428 or email kate.ison@medicalprotection.org

Notes to editor:

1. Medical Protection conducted a survey of 127 GP members in August 2016 to determine their experience of patient complaints.
2. All figures, unless otherwise stated, are from YouGov Plc. Total sample size was 2021 British adults. Fieldwork was undertaken between 2 – 3 August 2016. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all GB adults (aged 18+).
3. A Medical Protection Society (MPS) survey of 600 GP members reveals that 67% of respondents are fearful of being sued by patients. MPS conducted a survey of GP members to find out about their experience and awareness of claims for clinical negligence and how it had impacted on them. The survey ran from 3 February 2015 to 10 February 2015 and received 600 responses.
4. Medical Protection offers a *Mastering difficult interactions with patients*. Doctors who received training to improve their communication skills report a significantly lower rate of difficult interactions. We understand that dealing with difficult interactions with patients can be a significant cause of stress, yet the nature of most clinical jobs makes these encounters unavoidable. For further information, please click [here](#).
5. Medical Protection also offers whole day Masterclasses, which give doctors the opportunity to test a range of skills (including assessing and managing patient expectations and practising shared decision making) on professional actors. Doctors highly rate the feedback received from the actors and from the clinicians who run these. For further information, please click [here](#).
6. Dr Helen Hartley is a medicolegal adviser at Medical Protection. Dr Hartley qualified as a doctor in 1992 and trained in anaesthesia, working as a consultant anaesthetist in London for 7 years before joining Medical Protection in 2010.
7. Infographics are available on request

About Medical Protection

Medical Protection is a trading name of The Medical Protection Society Limited (“MPS”). The Medical Protection Society Limited (“MPS”) is the world’s leading protection organisation for doctors, dentists and healthcare professionals. We protect and support the professional interests of more than 300,000 members around the world. Membership provides access to expert advice and support together with the right to request indemnity for complaints or claims arising from professional practice.

Our in-house experts assist with the wide range of legal and ethical problems that arise from professional practice. This can include clinical negligence claims, complaints, medical and dental council inquiries, legal and ethical dilemmas, disciplinary procedures, inquests and fatal accident inquiries.

Our philosophy is to support safe practice in medicine and dentistry by helping to avert problems in the first place. We do this by promoting risk management through our workshops, E-learning, clinical risk assessments, publications, conferences, lectures and presentations.

MPS is not an insurance company. All the benefits of membership of MPS are discretionary as set out in the Memorandum and Articles of Association.