



# Avoiding easy mistakes

## Five medicolegal hazards for interns and SHOs

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## Important – please note

Due to the dynamic nature of medical law we suggest that you access our website at [www.medicalprotection.org/ireland](http://www.medicalprotection.org/ireland) for the most up-to-date information. June 2015.

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**Editorial team:** *Editor* Sara Williams *Marketing* Zoe Gaunt, Rachel Lynch  
*Contributors*, Dr Su Jones, Dr Iain Barclay, Dr Stephanie Bown.

This booklet was produced with interns and SHOs in mind. It is intended to offer general guidance to help them circumvent the commonest pitfalls encountered in everyday practice. MPS members are always welcome to telephone our medicolegal advice line – +44 113 243 6436 – for more specific practical advice and support.

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. Our benefits include access to indemnity, expert advice and peace of mind. Highly qualified advisers are on hand to talk through a question or concern at any time.

Our in-house experts assist with the wide range of legal and ethical problems that arise from professional practice. This includes 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.

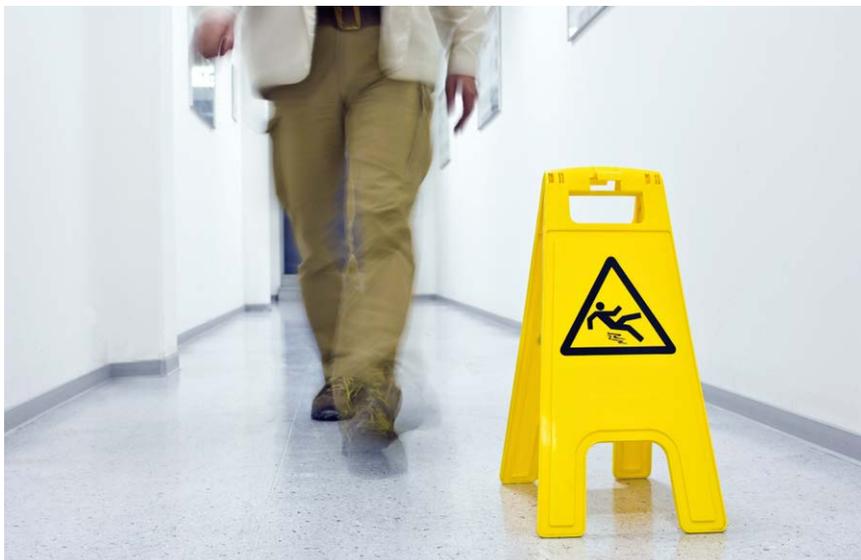
# Introduction

## Why are medicolegal issues important?

As doctors, we all make mistakes – even an experienced surgeon can slip up. What is important is that you know how to respond to mistakes in the correct way. Many doctors are unsure about how medicine and law interact; this may reflect a lack of teaching in medical school or a lack of understanding of how medicolegal principles translate into practice.

Medicolegal principles underpin every move a clinician makes. In a climate where doctors have to justify their actions more and more to patients, colleagues and the Medical Council, an awareness of the medical law and guidance that relates to your practice is essential. Good doctors apply clinical knowledge in a way that is legally and ethically correct. They will also know when to consult senior colleagues and avoid working in a vacuum. Simple things like writing concise and accurate records, getting valid consent from patients and knowing when to seek advice can help you practise safely.

This booklet takes you through five of the top medicolegal hazards for doctors, and includes examples of how problems can arise in practice. If you need any further advice you can contact MPS online or by phone. This should help you go onto the wards more confident that you will be able to practise safely.



## Consent

Inexperienced doctors should not feel pressured to do anything beyond their knowledge, experience and competence and this includes being asked to obtain consent for a procedure that they are not familiar with. The Medical Council make it clear that interns should not usually be asked to obtain consent unless the procedure is a minor one with which they are familiar. If you are unsure about what is involved in a procedure, even if it is a minor one, you should get a senior to explain or demonstrate it as part of training before ever agreeing to take consent for it from a patient.

Consent is a process, rather than a form-filling exercise. The ethical and legal rationale behind this is to respect patient's autonomy and their right to control their own life and what happens to their own body.

Failure to take consent properly can lead to medicolegal problems including complaints, claims and disciplinary proceedings. If your actions are scrutinised by the Medical Council you'll need more than a signature on a consent form to fight your corner.

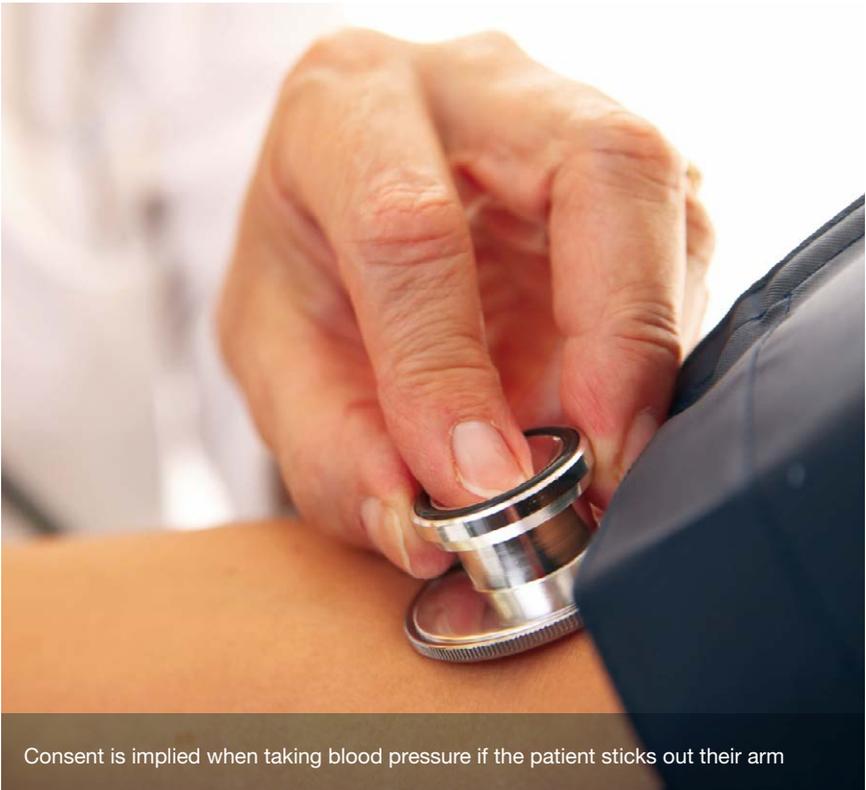
## Survival tips

- Always act in your patient's best interests.
- If you take consent, record in the notes what the patient has been told.
- Use your common sense – consent is patient-specific and depends on the individual's circumstances, including age, lifestyle, occupation, sporting interests, expectations etc. It may well be that you are not in a position to advise fully eg, a professional athlete.
- Patients are presumed competent to consent unless proved otherwise.
- Any competent adult can refuse treatment.
- Where an adult patient is deemed to lack capacity to make decisions, reasonable steps should be taken to find out whether any other person has legal authority to make decisions on their behalf. If so, the team should seek that person's consent to the proposed treatment.
- If no other person has this authority, your senior colleagues will have to decide what action to take, taking the patient's best interests into account.
- A judgement that a patient lacks the capacity to make a particular decision does not imply that they are unable to make other decisions in the future.

## Scenario

Dr U is in his first week as an intern in surgery. He is sitting at the desk in the ward filling in forms, when a nurse tells him that there is a patient going to theatre, within the next few minutes, who seems to have the consent form missing from his notes. She insists that the consultant “will get very cross” if the patient turns up in theatre without all the appropriate documentation. The nurse mentions that the patient’s procedure has already been cancelled once, and it would be terrible if it happens again. Dr U explains that he has never consented a patient before, and doesn’t think he should do it, but, the nurse insists that “it is only a gastroscopy, not rocket science”.

Dr U rightly ignores the pressure, and hurries to theatre to ask one of his senior colleagues for advice. His colleague takes the patient’s consent himself so that there is no delay and makes sure that the consultant demonstrates the procedure to Dr U so that he understands what is involved.



Consent is implied when taking blood pressure if the patient sticks out their arm

## Prescribing

Prescribing is one of the most dangerous areas for all clinicians and can be particularly hazardous for the inexperienced doctor. It is fraught with potential pitfalls ranging from transcription errors and inadvertent dosage mistakes to overlooked drug interactions, allergies and side effects, the consequences of which may be profound both for the patient and the prescriber. It is imperative that you have a good knowledge of the pharmacology and the legislation surrounding drugs, and any protocols and controlled drug routines which apply within your workplace – if unsure, ask.

Always document allergies and take care to double-check names, doses and frequency ensuring that any prescription you write is legible. You should not feel pressured to do anything beyond your competence; always get a senior to do it. If you are unsure about a prescription, or mishear on a ward round, always seek clarification, never guess. If a patient is admitted and there is any doubt regarding their current medication then consult the hospital pharmacists or the patient's GP.

## Survival tips

- Prescriptions must be legible, dated and signed and must state your Medical Council number. They should clearly identify the patient, the drug, the dose, frequency and start/finish dates.
- Doctors on the trainee specialist division of the Medical Council's Register are not permitted to practise medicine outside of their training post and hence should not prescribe drugs other than in connection with that post.
- Be aware of a patient's drug allergies and be particularly careful when prescribing multiple medications in case the combination might cause side effects.
- Good handovers require good leadership and communication. If you are asked to prescribe a drug or treatment regime with which you are not familiar you should ask for help.
- Refer to the IMF.
- Verbal prescriptions are only acceptable in emergency situations and should be written up at the first available opportunity. If a telephone prescription is necessary, you should make a note of the call in the patient's notes and records and send a written prescription to the pharmacist without delay. Particular care should be taken that the correct drug is used.

## Scenario

Dr S is on duty in the children's ward. He has just admitted Patrick, a two-year-old child with a high temperature. He sits down to write his notes and takes the opportunity to ask one of the nurses to give Patrick 180mg of paracetamol, which would be appropriate to his weight. She asks for it to be prescribed, but Dr S insists that he will write it up as soon as he has completed his entry in the patient's chart. He points to Patrick's bed: "it's for Patrick, the new admission – the little boy at the end of the ward - you can not miss him", he says. The nurse agrees reluctantly and goes to get the medicine and Dr S concentrates on writing in the chart. He looks up to see the nurse returning from the bed of another new patient who has just arrived on the ward and realises that the paracetamol has been given to the wrong patient, who is also called Patrick.

Dr S tells the family of the second child what has happened and explains that the paracetamol was not prescribed for their son. He apologises profusely and immediately calculates whether the paracetamol could cause an overdose. Luckily he is a bigger child, and has not taken any paracetamol recently, so no harm has been done and Dr S is able to reassure his parents. Dr S makes sure his patient gets his paracetamol, which he properly prescribes. He also fills in an incident form after apologising to the nurse involved. They both agree that it was an easily preventable mistake and an incident from which they have each learned an important lesson. Later that day Dr S discusses the incident with his consultant, who reminds Dr S that he could have caused a patient to suffer avoidable harm but is supportive of the action he has taken to rectify the error that was made.



Prescribing is one of the most dangerous areas for all clinicians

## Confidentiality

Confidentiality is the cornerstone of a successful doctor–patient relationship. Indeed the word “confidence” derives from the Latin *con* “with” and *fidere* “to trust”. The Medical Council is clear that doctors who break a patient’s confidence undermine trust in the medical profession and they will be dealt with very seriously. Patients are entitled to expect that information about them will be held in confidence.

### Survival tips

- Before breaching confidentiality, always consider obtaining consent.
- Take advice from senior colleagues.
- Remember that confidential information includes the patient’s name.
- Competent children have the same rights to confidentiality as adults.
- Doctors can breach confidentiality only when their duty to society overrides their duty to individual patients and it is deemed to be in the public interest.
- Doctors are required to report to various authorities a range of issues, including notifiable diseases (eg, TB), births, illegal abortions and people suspected of terrorist activity.
- The courts can also require doctors to disclose information, although it would be a good idea to contact MPS if you find yourself presented with a court order.
- High-risk areas where breaches can occur are lifts, canteens, computers, printers, wards, A&E departments, pubs and restaurants.
- Be careful not to leave memory sticks or handover sheets lying around.

## Scenario

Dr A is a first year SHO working in accident and emergency. He has just completed his first Saturday night shift; which was very busy. Several of the patients who attended were treated for bruises and lacerations to their hands. Dr A suspected that most of these injuries had been caused by fighting, although this was not always the history given by the patient. One of his more senior colleagues complained that it is “the same every weekend”.

Just as Dr A is due to leave the hospital a Garda comes to A&E enquiring about any men, who may have attended with cuts to the hands. He asks for a list of the names and addresses of any such patients who have been seen during the course of the evening. A young man had broken into an empty property, through a glass window, and stolen some goods. The Garda suspects the man was injured in the process. There were no victims; and no suggestion of a threat to public safety, it was a simple case of burglary.

Dr A is unsure whether he can provide the information requested. He calls his consultant, who advises him that in these circumstances, where there has been a blanket request for information and where there is no obvious risk to the general public, he would be unlikely to be able to justify breaching the confidence of all of the patients concerned even if one of them might be the burglar. The consultant agrees that this is a matter for him to deal with and speaks to the Garda personally.



Converse with colleagues carefully

## Record keeping

Legible notes must be kept primarily to assist the patient when receiving treatment. But, secondly, should there be any future litigation against your hospital the notes will form the basis of the hospital's defence. Notes are a reflection of the quality of care given so get into the habit of writing comprehensive and contemporaneous notes.

Adequate records enable you or somebody else to reconstruct the essential parts of each patient contact without reference to memory, a colleague should be able to carry on where you left off.

## Survival tips

- Remember that confidential information includes a patient's name and address.
- A breach of confidentiality may be justifiable when a doctor's duty to society overrides their duty to the individual patient and it is deemed to be in the public interest. For example when there is a threat of serious harm to the patient or others. Before breaching confidentiality, always consider obtaining consent. Take advice from senior colleagues.
- Disclosure of patient information may be required by law, for example to comply with infectious disease regulations. The courts can also require doctors to disclose information, although it would be a good idea to contact MPS if you find yourself presented with a court order.
- Patient information remains confidential even after death. Consider the purpose behind any request for disclosure and the possible effect on the reputation of the deceased.
- Patient privacy should be maintained at all times, accidental disclosure of confidential information should not occur. High-risk areas where breaches can occur are lifts, canteens, computers, printers, wards, A&E departments, pubs and restaurants. Be careful not to leave memory sticks or handover sheets lying around.
- Patient information should be held securely and in compliance with data protection legislation.

## Scenario

Dr P is working in a medical ward when she sees Mrs G, a patient referred from A&E, after she suddenly collapsed. She takes a comprehensive history, and does a complete examination. Dr P then notices that some blood samples were taken from her in A&E, and checks on the results server on the hospital intranet. She finds out that the samples “have clotted” and new samples need to be sent. The phlebotomists are quite busy, but they agree that they’ll do it as soon as possible. Dr P finishes her shift by writing the history, examination findings and results, she also writes “bloods”, followed by a tick, meaning that they have been sent. During the handover she doesn’t tell the next doctor that the blood results need checking. Mrs G becomes unwell within the next few hours, and the registrar on duty comes to see her. He is reassured by the notes that recent blood results were normal, and checks on the results server himself. It is only at this stage, that it is discovered that the patient is severely anaemic.

Dr P failed to ensure that the documentation was clear indicating what had, and what had not been done. Luckily Mrs G came to no harm.



Notes should be comprehensive and contemporaneous

## Probity

The fundamental partnership that exists between patient and doctor is based on honesty, trust, confidentiality, mutual respect, responsibility and accountability.

Doctors must be honest and trustworthy when signing forms, reports and other documents. You should make sure that any documents they write or sign are not false or misleading. This means that doctors must take reasonable steps to verify the information in the documents, and must not deliberately leave out anything relevant.

You may encounter families who don't want certain information visible on the death certificate, but doctors have a legal and professional obligation to complete the certificate truthfully.

## Survival tips

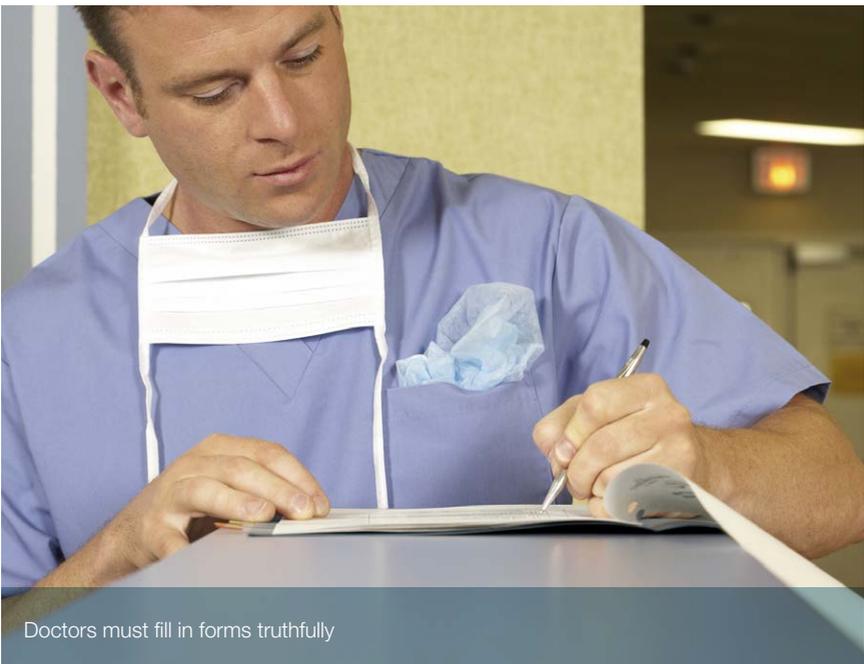
- Probity means being honest and trustworthy and acting with integrity.
- Be honest about your experiences, qualifications and position.
- Be honest in all your written and spoken statements, whether you are giving evidence or acting as a witness in litigation.
- You must be open and honest with any financial arrangements with patients and employers, insurers and other organisations or individuals.
- Never sign a form unless you have read it and you are absolutely sure that what you are saying is true.
- If you are uncertain double check your work with a senior.
- Assume that all records will be seen by the patient and/or others, eg, the Medical Council or a court.

## Scenario

Dr T is in the second week of his surgical training. Following an uneventful cholecystectomy at which he assisted, Dr T is delegated the responsibility of writing up the post-operative plan on the consultant's instructions. He sets off to do this but is distracted when a colleague speaks to him about another patient. In his haste to get back to theatre he unfortunately forgets to write up the postoperative instructions for hourly urine output monitoring before the patient returns to the ward.

Some hours later Dr T is called to see the patient who is complaining of abdominal pain. When he assesses her Dr T realises that the patient has not passed urine since the operation. Dr T quickly alters the chart to include the instructions that he had previously omitted. Dr A, a registrar, saw Dr T alter the record.

Dr A confronts Dr T about his actions, but Dr T pleads with him not to say anything. Meanwhile, the patient has come to no harm. Dr A calls MPS for advice. A medicolegal adviser suggests that Dr A raise the matter with Dr T's consultant or supervisor. Dr A does this, and Dr T receives firm advice from his consultant, who addresses it as a training issue, but makes it clear that if his actions were to be repeated, Dr T could face disciplinary action.



Doctors must fill in forms truthfully

## Useful links\*

**Data Protection (Amendment) Act 2003** – [www.irishstatutebook.ie](http://www.irishstatutebook.ie)

**Irish Medical Council**, – [www.medicalcouncil.ie](http://www.medicalcouncil.ie)

*Guide to Professional Conduct and Ethics for Registered Medical Practitioners (2009)*  
*Good Medical Practice in Seeking Informed Consent to Treatment*

**Irish Medicines Formulary (IMF)** – [www.formulary.ie](http://www.formulary.ie)

**MPS factsheets** – [www.medicalprotection.org/ireland/factsheets](http://www.medicalprotection.org/ireland/factsheets)

*Confidentiality – general principles*

*Giving Evidence*

*Medical records*

*Safe prescribing*

**MPS booklets** – [www.medicalprotection.org/ireland/booklets](http://www.medicalprotection.org/ireland/booklets)

*Consent to Medical Treatment in Ireland – An MPS Guide*

*MPS Guide to Medical Records in Ireland*

**Office of the Information Commissioner Ireland** – [www.oic.gov.ie](http://www.oic.gov.ie)

**The Expert Witness Directory of Ireland** – [www.expertwitnessireland.info](http://www.expertwitnessireland.info)

\* The information listed above was available at the time of going to press. Where possible we list the full web address of specific information, however, as resources may be moved, updated or deleted by the owners of third party websites, we may only list their main website address. Most sites provide the facility to search their content for the titles and information listed above.

**MEDICAL PROTECTION SOCIETY**  
PROFESSIONAL SUPPORT AND EXPERT ADVICE

33 Cavendish Square, London W1G 0PS  
Victoria House, 2 Victoria Place, Leeds LS11 5AE  
39 George Street, Edinburgh, EH2 2HN  
[www.medicalprotection.org/ireland](http://www.medicalprotection.org/ireland)

### **Medicolegal enquiries**

**T** 0800 561 1010  
**F** +44 113 241 0500  
**E** [querydoc@medicalprotection.org](mailto:querydoc@medicalprotection.org)

### **Membership enquiries**

**T** 1800 509 441 (toll-free within Ireland)  
**F** +44 113 243 0500  
**E** [member.help@medicalprotection.org](mailto:member.help@medicalprotection.org)

Calls to Membership Services may be recorded for monitoring and training purposes.

Please direct all comments, questions or suggestions about MPS service, policy and operations to:

### **Chief Executive**

Medical Protection Society  
33 Cavendish Square,  
London W1G 0PS, United Kingdom

In the interests of confidentiality please do not include information in any email that would allow a patient to be identified.

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