Q&A: Complaints

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QUESTIONs

Is it necessary to present every complaint I have had at appraisal, some of the written ones I have received recently seem quite petty and it might be a waste of my appraiser’s time to look at them. What are the rules?

It is not uncommon for GPs to receive complaints that need a response from their practice complaints procedure, or from their primary care organisation. Most complaints are satisfactorily resolved at an early stage. It is, however, expected that all formal complaints are discussed at your appraisal.

How do we define a formal complaint?

A formal complaint is one that activated, or should have activated, the practice complaints procedure, involved the primary care organisation, or involved any other formal health service organisation. Your response to complaints and your learning from them is an important part of your professional development. Failure to disclose complaints is a breach of your duty to act honestly i.e. a breach of probity.

SCENARIOS

My appraisal website asks me to declare whether I have received any complaints this year. I have not had any formal complaints but saw a patient in surgery who was upset with how I had treated them. After I explained what had happened they did not take the issue any further. Should I declare this incident?

The incident you are describing does not involve any practice or NHS complaints procedure so does not need to be declared as a complaint. This type of feedback from patients can be part of your learning from practice so might be discussed elsewhere in your appraisal or form the basis of a Significant Event Analysis.

My colleague has received a serious complaint and I am mentioned because I saw the patient on one occasion but was not subject to direct criticism. Do I need to declare this as a complaint against me?

If you are directly involved in a complaint in this way you should declare it at your appraisal. Your comments can just be confined to your role in the complaint and do not need to discuss your colleagues actions unless they are relevant to your actions.

I have been involved in a complaint and had to make an apology to the complainant after judgement from the ombudsman. I do not agree with some aspects of the
judgment against me. How should I discuss this in my appraisal?

Many doctors feel uncomfortable about the outcome of a complaint. Your appraisal is not the forum to be directly critical of a judgement made against you; you need to demonstrate that you have learned from the incident and show how the incident and judgment has changed your practice. If you do not agree with some aspects of the judgment you must ensure that discuss them in a professional and reflective manner.

What supporting documentation should I include in my discussion of a complaint made against me?

Any supporting documentation you provide for discussion at your appraisal needs to be relevant to the case but anonymised so that neither the complainant nor other clinicians involved can be identified. Remember that anonymisation can involve more than just deleting the names of those involved but care needs to taken not to include other details that might identify parties involved. If your discussion of the complaint in the appraisal document is thorough and detailed it may be appropriate to omit any supporting documentation to ensure confidentiality.

I received a complaint several years ago which has only now been settled. Should I declare this in my current appraisal?

Complaints should be declared at appraisal whatever stage they are at. It is also reasonable to detail changes to your practice that have occurred in years subsequent to when a complaint has been settled, although it may be more appropriate to discuss this elsewhere in the appraisal.