

SOUTHERN HEALTH & SOCIAL SERVICES COUNCIL



Response to General Medical Council Consultation Document

June 2005

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1. The Southern Health & Social Services Council (SHSSC) is one of four Health & Social Services Councils in Northern Ireland and covers the Southern area of Northern Ireland.
2. The HSSCs were set up by the Government in 1991 to represent the views and opinions of the public to decision makers in health and social services. The four HSSCs work collaboratively to address regional matters to ensure a co-ordinated approach.
3. On a shared basis the SHSSC along with the other HSSCs has fed into GMC activities over the years particularly through the mechanism of the patients' reference group. Concerns of the SHSSC would have been the perception that the GMC was largely focused on England and the lack of lay input as compared to medical representation.
4. Therefore SHSSC welcomes the GMC's recent reforms believing that they will make the organisation more fit for purpose. We particularly welcome the establishment of offices in Scotland and Wales.
5. The consultation in relation to the most effective model of operation in Northern Ireland is also very welcome. A structure that allows for local responsiveness is important if the GMC is to fulfil its obligations and ensure consistency of standards across the UK. Northern Ireland obviously has a land border with the Republic of Ireland and this may provide an opportunity for the GMC in relation to sharing good practice in relation to standards outside the UK.
6. The SHSSC notes that there is currently lay representation from Northern Ireland but that the structure does not guarantee that this

would always be the case. We believe that this is a genuine cause for concern that it is obviously noted by the GMC but not addressed. A different structure as proposed by Option 2 would improve Northern Ireland's input into policy input and representation at meetings and events. However, it would not address the issue of a guaranteed lay place for Northern Ireland to ensure that the public's voice is heard. At this stage we are not clear whether this situation also pertains to Wales and Scotland. This matter requires further thought and discussion in our opinion.

7. The SHSSC is fully in agreement with the GMC recommendation that Option 2 is the preferred option and that a dedicated staffed office should be established in Northern Ireland.
8. The SHSSC notes that the consultation states that the Northern Ireland office should be proactive in communicating with key stakeholders including patient groups. We would request that this should specifically include the HSSCs as the organisations with the statutory remit to represent the views of the public.
9. On a related note, one further function for the GMC office may be to stimulate lay/public interest in the GMCs work. This is different from the media in that this may include working with HSSCs to stimulate local interest, contact with regional voluntary sector groupings, etc.
10. At this early stage, it was obviously inappropriate to develop the thinking around Option 2. However, we would like to flag up one or two issues for future consideration.
 - i) Northern Ireland has an integrated health and social services system. This may provide opportunities for the GMC to reflect on medical services as part of that wider community.
 - ii) As part of the Review of Public Administration currently underway in Northern Ireland, the issue of decentralisation

of services has been raised. Whilst Belfast is the administrative centre for NI, it may be useful to consider possible locations for a base in the context of an inclusive approach that looks at services beyond the Eastern area.

- iii) We are not clear what the definition of lay is in relation to the GMC Council. In our view there needs to be a commitment to ensure that lay does not mean retired medical professionals and that every reasonable attempt is made to engage all sections of Northern Ireland society in GMC activity in NI.

11. Finally, the four HSSCs occasionally come together to be consulted on matters of common concern. If the GMC so desired, it may be possible to convene a joint meeting to enable further discussion with GMC representatives in relation to taking forward whatever preferred option agreed.