
Who to complain to – information for patients in Northern Ireland

The process of making a complaint will be easier and less stressful if you complain to the right organisation first time round.

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1. Complaining locally (Health and Social Care)

If you are unhappy with the care or treatment you receive from the health and social care services in Northern Ireland, you have the right to complain. Your complaint will be taken seriously and will be treated in confidence.

Who can complain?

Anyone who uses health and social care services can complain. Health and social care services include hospitals, community services, nursing or residential homes, ambulance services, social services, family doctors and health service pharmacists, opticians and dentists. You can also complain on someone else's behalf, although you will generally need their consent.

How to complain?

You can complain in the way that best suits you. This can be face to face, on the telephone, in a letter or by email. You should try to provide details of:

- how to contact you;
- who or what you are complaining about;
- where and when the event that caused your complaint happened; and,
- if possible, what you would like to be done to address your complaint.

You should try to complain as soon as possible, usually within six months of you becoming aware that you have a cause for complaint and normally no longer than 12 months after the event. But you don't have to wait – if you are unhappy with something, you can speak to any of the staff who are dealing with your treatment or care and they will try to resolve your concerns straight away.

Who to complain to?

You can speak to any member of staff who is involved in your treatment or care about your complaint.

Alternatively, all health and social care service organisations will have someone who is responsible for dealing with complaints and you can ask to speak to them.

If your complaint relates to services provided by a GP, or a health service dentist, pharmacist or optician, you can also contact the Health and Social Care Board.

What will happen next?

Your complaint will be acknowledged within 2-3 working days of receipt. You should receive a full response within 10 days if your complaint was about a GP, dentist, pharmacist or optician. If your complaint was about a hospital or community service, you should receive a full response within 20 working days.

Some complaints take longer to resolve than others. You should be told if this is the case and be given an explanation.

Help with making a complaint

Health and social care service complaints managers can provide you with more information on how to make a complaint.

You can also contact the [Patient and Client Council](#) who can provide free and confidential advice, information and help to make a complaint.

Specialist advocacy services may also be available. Complaints managers or the Patient and Client Council can tell you about these.

What to do if you're still not happy?

If you are not happy with the response to your complaint, you can contact the service again and they will try to address your concerns.

If you remain unhappy, you can refer your complaint to the [Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints](#) (the Ombudsman). The Ombudsman will look at your complaint and decide whether he should investigate it.

Complaints about independent establishments

If a Health and Social Care (HSC) Trust has placed you or a friend or relative in an independent establishment, such as a residential or nursing home, and you have a complaint you should raise it first with the provider of care. If you prefer, you can raise your concerns with the HSC Trust who commissioned the care.

If you are not happy with the outcome of the HSC complaints procedure you may refer your complaint to the NI Commissioner for Complaints (the Ombudsman)

The [Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority](#) will monitor the effectiveness of complaints handling across all regulated services.

How do I write a complaint?

A complaint letter need not be long or detailed, but it should include:

- who or what you are complaining about, including the names of staff if you know them
- where and when the events of the complaint happened. If you are complaining about several matters, make it clear which are the most important ones
- what, if anything, you have already done about the issues; What you would like from the complaint, (for example, an apology or an explanation, or changes to services)

2. Complaining locally (private care)

If you received private healthcare, such as care from:

- independent (private) healthcare providers including independent (private) hospitals and clinics, and private doctors
- nursing Homes
- hospice Care
- residential Care Homes
- children's Homes

Please contact the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority:

www.rqia.org.uk.

You can also view the RQIA complaints procedure.

www.rqia.org.uk/cms_resources/RQIA%20Complaints%20Policy%20Oct%2007.pdf.

In a small number of cases, there may be doctors working completely independently from any structured organisation and there will be no complaints procedure.

If you do have a concern about a doctor who works independently, then the GMC will look at your complaint. If you have any queries, talk to someone from our contact centre (0161 923 6602) who will be able to advise you.

3. Complaining to the GMC

The General Medical Council is responsible for ensuring that doctors in the UK meet the standards of good medical practice we set for them. This means that in more serious cases, we can take action to stop a doctor from practising or to restrict their practice in some way.

If you think your doctor is not fit to practise or may be a risk to patients, then please contact us.

If you are not sure whether you should make a complaint, it may be helpful to discuss your concerns with us by ringing 0845 357 0022. All calls are confidential and we will advise you what to do.

These are examples of the types of cases where we may need to act:

- serious or repeated mistakes in carrying out medical procedures or in diagnosis, such as prescribing drugs in a dangerous way
- failure to examine a patient properly or to respond reasonably to a patient's needs
- fraud or dishonesty
- serious breaches of a patient's confidentiality
- any serious criminal offence - If you think that a doctor has committed a criminal offence, you should contact the police as well as the GMC.

What can the GMC do?

If we identify concerns about the doctor that mean we need to take action, we can:

- issue a warning
- agree undertakings, for example the doctor agrees to re-train, or work under supervision
- refer the doctor to the Medical Practitioners Tribunal Service for a medical practitioners tribunal hearing which as well as the above can additionally:
 - put conditions on the doctor's registration so that they are only allowed to do medical work under supervision or so that they are restricted to certain areas of practice
 - suspend the doctor's name from the register – so that they cannot practise during the suspension period
 - remove the doctor's name from the register.

What can't the GMC do?

- give you a detailed explanation of what happened to you – this can only come from the doctor or the healthcare organisation
- order a doctor to provide the treatment you want
- help you with a claim for compensation
- fine a doctor
- order a doctor to give you access to your records
- make a doctor apologise to you.

4. Help and advice organisations

Wherever you live in the UK, there are advice and advocacy organisations that can help you if you are thinking about making a complaint.

In Northern Ireland the Patient Client Council (PCC) can also provide assistance and support at any stage of the health and social care services complaints procedure.

The Patient Client Council is an independent body who represent the views of the public in all areas of health and social care. They can also assist you to make a complaint. This is a confidential and free service.

While the council cannot investigate complaints on your behalf, they can;

- advise you on how to make a complaint
- advise you who to complain to
- help you with making your complaint.

In some cases council staff will draft letters for you and accompany you to meetings.

Further information

To find out more about your local office of the Patient Client Council visit their website <http://www.patientclientcouncil.hscni.net> or call 0800 917 0222

5. Other complaints

There are a range of complaints, which the GMC cannot deal with, for example if

- the patient feels let down by a system, not an individual
- the patient feels let down by a team of people, not an individual
- the patient feels let down by an individual who is not a doctor

In these cases, patients are advised to contact the help and advice organisations which are named on the Local help services page. These organisations will advise you on the appropriate organisation to contact to make your complaint.