

Use patient complaints to support your registrar's education and training

Patient complaints involving GP registrars are not uncommon and can be a source of significant emotional distress. However, they are also recognised as powerful educational opportunities. Complaints often provide insight into areas of practice that are less visible in formal teaching – particularly communication, professionalism, and patient-centred care – and provide opportunities for uniquely authentic feedback.

Evidence suggests that clinicians who later incur recurrent complaints often demonstrate early, recognisable patterns, frequently related to interpersonal and communication behaviours. For GP registrars, who are still forming their consultation style and professional identity, these behaviours are potentially modifiable. Within a safe supervisory relationship, complaints can be reframed as formative learning opportunities supporting reflection, skill development, and improved patient care. This approach shifts complaints from a reactive, disciplinary process to a proactive tool for education and professional growth.

The following approach to educational support assumes that the complaint is being managed appropriately from a medicolegal perspective. As well, all formal patient complaints should be discussed with the registrar's medical educator and notified to the College.

Summary

Patient complaints, while challenging, offer rich opportunities for learning and professional development. When approached in a structured and educationally supportive way, they can enhance registrar insight, strengthen key consultation skills, and contribute to improved patient care and system performance.

A STRUCTURED APPROACH

Start with safety and support

- Acknowledge the emotional impact of the complaint
- Normalise the experience - *"Complaints happen to all GPs"*
- Ensure appropriate supports are in place (personal, educational, medicolegal)

- TIPS**
- Address emotions before analysis—distress can impair learning
 - Avoid premature judgement
 - Be alert to signs of significant distress and escalate support if needed

Clarify the complaint

- Establish what happened (distinguishing facts from perceptions)
- Explore contributing system or contextual factors

- TIPS**
- Use multiple sources where available (notes, correspondence, staff input)
 - Avoid accepting the complaint at face value without exploration
 - Maintain curiosity

Reframe as a learning opportunity

- Shift focus from *"What went wrong?"* to *"What can we learn?"*
- Identify relevant domains: communication, clinical reasoning, systems/processes, professionalism

- TIPS**
- Explicitly model a growth mindset
 - Emphasise modifiable behaviours
 - Highlight that complaints often reflect complex interactions, not single errors
 - Focus learning also on how to manage a complaint

Undertake structured reflection

- Explore the registrar's perspective (thoughts, feelings, intentions)
- Invite the registrar to consider the patient's likely experience
- Identify alternative approaches for future practice

TIPS	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Use reflective models (e.g. Gibbs, Schön) to guide discussion• Allow time for reflection rather than rushing to solutions• Link reflection to specific moments in the consultation
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Link to competencies and curriculum

- Map the issues raised to relevant competency domains
- Identify specific behaviour changes and translate into a structured learning plan

TIPS	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Make learning explicit and goal-oriented• Make actions concrete and observable
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Teach specific skills

- Address identified learning needs with targeted teaching
- Focus on teachable and transferable skills such as communication e.g. empathy, expectation setting, managing uncertainty, documentation and safety-netting

TIPS	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Use role-play or modelling where appropriate• Reinforce strategies that can be applied immediately
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Look for a pattern

- Determine whether the complaint represents a single event or a recurring pattern
- Look for recurring themes e.g. communication style or an 'at-risk' trajectory
- Identify whether the complaint represents an individual or system-level issue

TIPS	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Review previous feedback or incidents• Escalate concerns early if patterns are emerging
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Close the loop

- Follow up issues over time
- Provide positive feedback when improvement occurs

TIPS	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Monitor for unintended consequences (e.g. defensive practice)• Revisit the issue after defined interval
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Model professionalism

- Demonstrate openness to feedback
- Share personal experiences with complaints where appropriate
- Model vulnerability and reflective, non-defensive responses to feedback

TIPS	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Use storytelling to enhance learning• Reinforce professionalism as an ongoing developmental process
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Use complaints for system improvement

- Identify potential practice or system changes
- Use the complaint to inform broader team learning

TIPS	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Engage the wider practice team where appropriate• Incorporate learning into quality improvement processes• Close the loop at a practice level, not just individually
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