



**Editorial**

# **Inability or Unwillingness to Recognise Error, Even When it is Pointed Out, is a Pointer to a Lack of Insight, a Unifying Characteristic That is Often Encountered in Healthcare Students Whose Adverse Behaviour Puts Them At Risk of a Career-Ending Expulsion From Their Studies as a Future Healthcare Professional**

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A year 4 medical student was on a medical training programme where one of the requirements was to obtain countersignatures in a log book to confirm attendance at educational activities. The log book had printed on the front cover a clear warning that the General Medical Council (the UK medical regulator) takes a very grave view of signature forgery, which was to be avoided without exception.

The programme included a requirement to make three visits at the home of an adult patient with a learning disability. These visits were arranged by the patient's family doctor, who knew the students' timetable and who selected suitable families who agreed to participate. One student failed to attend all three appointments with a family. The family, who were eager to be involved in, and support, medical student learning, were disappointed, and complained to the family doctor, who in turn contacted the medical school. The student was invited to meet a member of the medical school staff, who was startled to find that the student's logbook purported to contain the signature of the patient's parent confirming all three visits on specific dates. Even more surprising was that the logbook contained the student's reflective notes on what he had learned at each visit. After further investigation it was clear that the signatures had been forged and the reflective notes falsified.

Because of the gravity of the student's conduct, he was required to attend the university's Fitness to Practise Committee [1], one of the powers of the Committee being termination of studies and expulsion. At the Committee hearing, the student was asked who had been responsible for the forgery and falsification. The student denied all responsibility, and instead, to the Committee's great surprise, he blamed the university. He claimed that his errors were solely the result of the size of the font of the written warning on the logbook, which he felt was insufficient for an important warning. Although it was perfectly legible, and he

had read it and understood it, his view was that the warning should have been more prominent, with a much larger font, so as to provide much greater emphasis of the seriousness of the warning.

Blaming the university for his dishonesty was felt to be especially concerning, and showed a lack of insight [2]. The term insight into an error means the capacity to understanding why an error occurred, insight being an essential ability if one is to avoid repeatedly making the same mistakes.

In the context of errors, insight has three components, the willingness and ability to recognise and accept that what one has done is wrong, the willingness to explore and understand why the error occurred, and the ability to comprehend the reasons why there is a need to avoid repeating one's errors. We all make mistakes, but the expectation is that when these have been pointed out there will be no recurrence, particularly when an explicit warning [3] has been given.

## **Examples of behaviours that point to a lack of insight include:**

- An unwillingness to take responsibility for one's actions, such as placing the blame on anyone or anything other than oneself. Sometimes circumstances may have contributed to a problem behaviour, but it is important for an individual who has erred to recognise that they were nevertheless responsible for their own actions.
- Minimising the seriousness of an adverse behaviour such as describing repeated forgery of supervisor's signatures, or other serious dishonesty, as no more than a simple error. The demonstration of insight requires a recognition of why the behaviour happened, the seriousness and implications of the misconduct, the potential for harm, an acknowledgement that the behaviour was inconsistent with professional guidance or regulations, and setting out of a strategy to prevent recurrences of the adverse behaviour.
- Focussing on the negative effects on the student rather than on the harm or potential harm to others.

Taking steps to apologise [4] and remediate [5] at an early stage of an investigation could help to provide evidence

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of insight. The greater the delay, the greater the risk of a perception that the changes that are claimed may not be regarded as genuine. While expressions of regret and offering an apology are an important component of demonstrating insight, half-hearted or seemingly insincere apologies may make matters worse.

In terms of predicting the future risk of misconduct the presence or absence of insight is an important determinant. It is impossible safely to practice a health profession if one lacks insight into one's errors.

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