

GMC sees rise in doctors charged with accessing child pornography websites

Caroline White *London*

The UK doctors' regulatory body, the General Medical Council, has been forced to amend its sanctions guidance, in the light of the rapid rise in referrals of doctors who have been charged with accessing child pornography.

Between 1980 and 2002, just one case involving child pornography was referred to the GMC. But in 2003, the council's Professional Conduct Committee heard eight cases, resulting in six suspensions and two doctors being struck off the register.

So far this year, two doctors have been struck off and two suspended.

Although the overall numbers are small, the upwards trend looks set to continue, boosted by

the outcome of Operation Ore, the UK police hunt for internet paedophiles.

The operation has so far investigated 6000 suspects. Details of the suspects were passed on by the US Postal Inspection Services, which monitors paedophile activity in the United States.

In the United Kingdom, over 3500 people have been arrested and 1230 convictions made. Some 1300 cases remain to be investigated.

The GMC's Fitness to Practise Committee called for changes to the "indicative sanctions" guidance to ensure a clear and consistent approach to the handling of child pornography cases.

Changes were proposed at last month's council meeting, ahead of the usual consultation with other professional and patient bodies, although their views will be sought before the guidance takes effect in mid-May. But as the meeting's minutes make clear: "We need to act quickly... to ensure that guidance is available... as quickly as possible."

The proposed amendments recognise that when a doctor has been convicted of engaging in child pornography, "it is highly likely the only proportionate sanction will be erasure."

But every case must be considered individually, the GMC says, including whether "any exceptional mitigating factors" might instead warrant a minimum 12 months' suspension.

No examples are provided, but the guidance refers to the Court of Appeal, which in 2002 graded cases from 1 to 5 according to severity—allowing for a fine or conditional discharge for less serious offences.

A conviction automatically leads to inclusion on the sex offenders' register for a minimum of five years. The council stipulates that restricted GMC registration should apply in these cases, with consideration given to forbidding direct contact with patients during this period.

Colin Turner, head of special investigations at the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, said that doctors were too intelligent not to realise that they were helping to perpetuate child abuse by accessing child pornography. These doctors should automatically be subject to independent risk assessment to explore their attitudes to children, he said.

A GMC spokesperson said that the proposed amended guidance did not currently provide for this, and was still out for consultation. The council would welcome suggestions as part of that process. □

WHO resists food industry pressure on its diet plan

Fiona Fleck *Geneva*

The final draft of a global plan on how governments can help millions of people avoid chronic disease through diet and exercise has not been watered down under industry pressure, the World Health Organization said.

In 2002, WHO member states asked the organisation to come up with a plan to help them combat the growing burden of non-communicable diseases, such as cardiovascular diseases, type 2 diabetes, cancers, and obesity related conditions. These diseases together account for about 60% of deaths globally—most of them in the developing world.

WHO's global strategy on diet, physical activity, and health was recently amended to take into consideration proposals from 70 member states. It was published on the internet on 19 April ahead of adoption at the world health assembly being held in Geneva on 17 to 22 May.

Some countries, such as the United States, wanted to emphasise the role of individuals in taking responsibility for their health, while underlining the vital role of governments in "enabling" people to make healthier choices.

But despite intense pressure from the sugar, soft drinks, and food industries the WHO text retains its original reference to the role of taxation and subsidy in promoting production of healthier food and drink and still calls for more responsible marketing practices.

It also calls on the industry to limit levels of saturated fats, *trans* fatty acids, sugar, and salt in existing products and to use "clear and consistent food labelling" and evidence based health claims to help consumers make informed and healthy choices.

The strategy urges companies to "follow responsible marketing practices, particularly with regard to the promotion and marketing of foods high in saturated fats, sugars or salt, and especially to children."

"The draft strategy remains faithful to the spirit and intent of the previous January 2004 Executive Board draft, produced through a wide-ranging consultation process with all stakehold-

ers over 18 months," WHO said in a statement.

WHO originally intended to use a joint WHO and Food and Agriculture Organization expert consultation on diet, nutrition, and the prevention of chronic diseases, known as TRS 916. This was unveiled a year ago as the basis for the strategy (*BMJ* 2003;326:515).

In its final draft WHO followed critics' advice and referred to TRS 916 as one of several scientific sources that governments

can use to develop guidelines.

The plan has the backing of wealthy countries in Europe and Asia, as well as Australia, New Zealand, and Canada. The United States initially opposed it, and other countries that produce sugar—particularly in the developing world—have vowed to challenge it. □

World Health Organization Process for a Global Strategy on Diet, Physical Activity and Health can be accessed at www.who.int/hpr



Chewy sweets can contain high levels of sugar; WHO has called on the food industry to limit sugar levels in its products