

Ethics in Station 4

The Scenario Editorial Committee is currently reviewing the information for examiners in Station 4 (Communication Skills and Ethics). The review will consider the clarity and detail of the ethics information in order to enhance the quality of signposting for examiners. The ethics content of the stations is not part of the review and will remain unaltered.

Everyday ethics

Ethics, as a common competence for Station 4, is part and parcel of any given scenario, and is not necessarily presented as a discrete component by itself. Communication, for example, is typically infused with ethical significance – a non-paternalistic approach can support the engagement of patients with their own health care; showing respect for patients can strengthen the trust they bring to the consultation. More directly, safety in practice is fundamental to professional ethics. This is in line with the findings of the Mid Staffordshire NHS Foundation Trust Public Inquiry, chaired by Robert Francis QC, “that the system of medical training and education maintains as its first priority the safety of patients” (Recommendation 162). So too is acting in accordance with legal imperatives.

Multiple meanings

The word ‘ethics’ is itself multivocal – to some it may be synonymous with research ethics; to others it relates to ethical theory; still others read it in terms of personal conduct such as truth-telling. Similarly, ethical concepts like justice are understood in different ways, be it in a legal sense, or in the allocation of resources in health care, or insofar as patients are equitably dealt with at an individual level. All these interpretations are relevant to their appropriate contexts, and the function of the Station 4 information is to assist examiners in translating this to the MRCP(UK) PACES setting.

Intertwined norms

The complex weave of ethics, law, and professionalism is characteristic of these intertwined sets of norms that bear mutually upon each other, while not always being readily separable. The information for examiners is therefore intended to offer some orientation to the key competences of knowledge, skills, and attitudes being assessed across these domains. The language of ethics will be familiar to examiners, yet the normal variation in its usage has potential implications for reliability in assessment, hence the reason for reviewing the Station 4 information.

GMC standards

In reviewing the information for examiners, the terms of reference for the Scenario Editorial Committee will be the General Medical Council framework of standards and ethics in patient care. It is hoped that the results will interest colleagues as well as be of value to them in their particular roles as Station 4 examiners.

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