

Act swiftly and cleanly

Hindsight is a wonderful thing. The announcement this week that the General Medical Council is going to investigate the activities of six GPs and doctors in the Hyde area of Manchester following the Shipman Inquiry should send shivers down the spines of health care professionals everywhere. As the GPs themselves are quoted as saying, they are “shocked, stunned and bewildered” that a decision has been made for them to appear before professional conduct committees at the GMC.

Of course, if any of the doctors had been aware that there was a mass murderer in their midst, they would have not signed the cremation forms requested by Shipman; they would have been rather more circumspect about the deaths of many of his patients and asked the relatives more searching questions. Even Dame Janet Smith, chairman of the inquiry, is

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quoted as saying: “I do not think it would be fair to suggest that the doctors should have appreciated the significance of the different factors before they did.”

Dame Janet has also stated that it was the outdated system that allowed Shipman to kill without check. “I am critical of some of the Hyde doctors who signed cremation forms for Shipman for the lack of objective analysis they brought to their task. However, it is my opinion that Shipman’s ability to escape detection for so

long is primarily attributable not to the lack of thoroughness with which these individuals performed their duties but to the fundamental flaws in the system.”

So what is the GMC up to? Does it want to make an example of them? Is it trying to cover up its own shortcomings over the whole affair? Or is it under pressure from the Government or the Council for Healthcare Regulatory Excellence (formerly the Council for the Regulation of Healthcare Professionals) to be seen to be taking some action? Does the GMC really believe that this will make the slightest difference to public confidence in the medical profession?

The Journal suspects that all those people who had any dealings with Shipman have suffered enough, and must daily wish that they had been more suspicious of his activities.

The GMC — and any other regulatory body contemplating similar action against an individual involved with Shipman — needs to act swiftly and cleanly, and explain that it has to follow this course of action because it is legally obliged to do so, but that there will be no long-term consequences for those called to account. If there are, it will be a travesty of natural justice and health care regulation will no longer be serving either the professions or patients, but some dubious political ends.

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