



# Doctors with Performance Problems: Health, Personality and Social Factors



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## Background

Given the risks to patients posed by poor performance of doctors, the need to recognise and manage performance issues in trainee and qualified doctors is now well accepted.

Numerous factors affect performance in doctors. Internationally, assessment methods to detect and understand performance issues tend to focus on health, personality and organisational factors – an approach that is known as 'biopsychosocial' or 'holistic' (see Tables).

Theme	Factor
Biological	Physical health Mental health
Psychological	Work behaviour Personal qualities Responsibility Motivation
Social	Life events Isolation Academic performance Postgraduate education and training Cultural difference Language Communication Organisational factors

**Table 1** The biopsychosocial model and factors

## What We Did

- ❖ We identified potential biopsychosocial factors in 30 cases referred to the Individual Support Programme (ISP, service in Wales that provides remediation for medical students and doctors with performance issues).
- ❖ We compared the ISP data with data collected from an expert panel of postgraduate trainers in the School of Postgraduate Medicine and Dentistry, Cardiff University.

Mental health factors	Anxiety	Anxious when having to make decisions about patient care or presenting to senior colleagues. Woken by sense of panic at night.
	Depression	Sense of lack of drive to achieve, lost the way forward.

**Table 2** Examples of biological factors

## Aims

We aimed to find out whether such biopsychosocial factors are associated with performance problems in trainee and qualified doctors.

To do that, we explored:

- ❖ The range of biopsychosocial factors present in a selected set of cases.
- ❖ The interrelationships between these factors.

## Findings

- ❖ Analysis of the ISP data revealed 57 items that together described the wide ranging experiences and perceptions of the 30 cases. 3 items were related to biological factors, 20 items to psychological factors and 34 items to social factors. We then reduced these 57 items to 14 biopsychosocial factors, as shown in Table 1.

❖ The Cardiff trainers' data consisted of biopsychosocial factors identified by trainers describing factors that they felt were common amongst trainee doctors with performance issues. These factors were broadly similar to those emerging from the ISP analysis.

Life events	Life events impacting on performance	Managing work and family problems at the same time.
Isolation	Lives alone	Separated from family and friends, living alone contrary to their natural preference.
Language	Majority of English spoken at work	Tends to socialise with other people from own country, only speaks English at work.
Communication	Prefers to have time to think before speaking	Slow to clarify things and may be misunderstood by colleagues.
	Feels need to have better communication skills	Felt that they were not always able to make him / her-self clearly understood.
Organisational factors	Feels constrained by organisation	Felt ganged up on and isolated.
	Describes self as victim of bullying	Forceful consultant...put under a lot of pressure...felt undermined.

**Table 4** Examples of social factors

**Table 3** Examples of psychological factors

- ❖ This suggests that particular biopsychosocial factors do seem to be associated with doctors' performance problems, but what we need to know now is how many biopsychosocial factors are present in population of doctors who have not been referred for performance issues.

Work behaviour	Poor personal organisation	Difficulty with prioritising tasks, clerical work, thoroughness of note keeping, ward work and reporting.
	Inappropriate communications with patients	Difficulty with managing sensitive conversations.
	Difficult relationships with staff members	Interpersonal problems with other health professionals...poor behaviour, misunderstandings about professional boundaries.
Personal qualities	Low confidence self esteem	...feelings of lack of self worth; that they will get 'found out'.
	Tries not to offend	...not in their nature to have problems with colleagues. Just accept what is said and keep their thoughts to themselves.
	Puts too much pressure on self	...lacks recognition of own limitations.
	Lacks leadership skills	Difficulty with making intentions clear when in leadership role.
Responsibility	Lacks insight	Inability to respond to advice.

Find out more...



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