

## NEWS

## Language tests for EU doctors set to start in June in UK

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The General Medical Council has announced that it will be able to test the English language competence of doctors from other European Union countries from June this year.

The Department of Health in England confirmed in January that it would implement a UK-wide plan to allow the GMC to begin the tests.<sup>1</sup>

After a public consultation the regulator announced that it would require doctors from other European Union countries to provide evidence of their English skills or to undergo a language assessment if it had concerns about their ability to communicate effectively.<sup>2</sup> The GMC said that it expected to introduce the checks in June, subject to the legislative process.

At the same time as introducing tests for European doctors, the GMC will also introduce a requirement for doctors from all overseas countries to achieve an overall score of 7.5 out of 9 in the International English Language Testing System test. Overseas doctors are currently required to achieve a score of 7, the GMC said.

Of the 302 respondents to the public consultation on tests for doctors from other European Union countries, 91% agreed that it was fair and proportionate to require the same evidence of English language proficiency from European doctors as from other international medical graduates.

Over 80% also agreed that the GMC should not grant a licence to practise to a European doctor “when they have been unable or unwilling to show they have the necessary knowledge of English to practise safely in the UK.” In addition, 79% of respondents thought that the GMC should “indefinitely suspend doctors who fail to acquire the necessary knowledge of English to treat patients in the UK safely.”

After objections to a plan to charge doctors for language assessments undertaken as a requirement of a fitness to practise investigation, the GMC said that it would meet the cost of assessments required as part of any such investigation.

Commenting on the announcement, Niall Dickson, the GMC’s chief executive, said that the new measures would help the GMC

strengthen protection of patients and bring greater parity between its requirements for European doctors and those for doctors from outside Europe. “These are important steps to tighten up our procedures,” he said. “But, while we welcome the government’s support for our determination to achieve reform in this area, there is more to do.

“This is part of a package of measures that will further increase our scope to make sure that doctors coming to the UK from the European Union are able to communicate safely. Employers, including locum agencies, must also play their part and ensure that all doctors for whom they are responsible can communicate and practise safely.”

NHS Employers welcomed the announcement and said that the GMC’s proposals had been “overwhelmingly supported” by employers. Bill McMillan, NHS Employers’ head of medical pay and workforce, said, “These are proportionate, sensible proposals that put patients first by giving employers more power to ensure all NHS doctors can communicate well in English.

He added, “It is essential that all staff are able to communicate with their patients and colleagues safely and effectively in English, both orally and in writing, in whatever role they undertake, whether in clinical or support services. Language checks in their current form are improving and widely seen as robust, so it is important that they be applied consistently by employers across all jobs—regardless of where the staff are recruited from.”

- 1 Rimmer A. GMC language tests for doctors from EU are expected to be in place this summer. *BMJ Careers* 31 Jan 2014. <http://careers.bmj.com/careers/advise/view-article.html?id=20016262>.
- 2 General Medical Council. Consultation report: making sure all licensed doctors have the necessary knowledge of English to practise safely in the UK. 25 Jan 2013. [www.gmc-uk.org/Making\\_sure\\_all\\_licensed\\_doctors\\_have\\_the\\_necessary\\_knowledge\\_of\\_English\\_Consultation\\_report.pdf\\_55135396.pdf](http://www.gmc-uk.org/Making_sure_all_licensed_doctors_have_the_necessary_knowledge_of_English_Consultation_report.pdf_55135396.pdf).

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## Figure

