



Surgeon who performed wrong knee surgery is suspended for 12 months

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A consultant orthopaedic and trauma surgeon has been suspended from the UK medical register for 12 months for dishonesty after he performed the wrong knee surgery on a patient, then tried to cover it up with revision surgery which was not clinically indicated.

Alan Norrish's misconduct would never have come to light had he not reported himself to the General Medical Council, said Neil Dalton, chairing the medical practitioners' tribunal in Manchester.

This, along with his genuine remorse, glowing testimonials from colleagues, and a strong record of charity work convinced the tribunal not to strike him off, said Dalton.

Norrish was a senior consultant at Addenbrooke's Hospital in Cambridge when in January 2018 he carried out a medial uni-compartmental knee replacement on a patient at the private Nuffield Cambridge Hospital. In fact, she had been admitted for, and had consented to, a patellofemoral joint replacement.

Norrish admitted that he had failed to check the patient's medical records or radiographs before surgery. He discovered his error soon after, but did not notify the hospital of this "never event," nor tell the patient.

Instead he called the patient back four days later to inform her that radiographs showed an irregularity under the medial tibial plate that might be a fracture, and that a total knee replacement would be needed.

Two experts told the tribunal that in their view, based on the radiographic appearances, there was no clear fracture. The tribunal concluded that Norrish should have obtained a computed tomography scan and a second opinion on the possible fracture and that his motive in proposing the corrective surgery was at least partly to cover up his error in the first operation. Immediate total knee replacement was not clinically indicated, said the expert witnesses, who suggested that a period of conservative treatment would be the first option.

Norrish wrote to the Nuffield's matron and to the patient's GP explaining his decision, but did not mention his error. Instead he falsely stated that the patient had been admitted initially for

a medial uni-compartmental knee replacement, the wrong surgery that he had inadvertently performed.

He performed the total knee replacement in February 2018, by which time he had been made deputy medical director of Addenbrooke's. The outcome was satisfactory, but the patient may need further interventions in later years, the hearing was told. Norrish reported himself to the GMC on 9 March 2018.

The GMC asked the tribunal to strike Norrish off the register, arguing that he had shown repeated and persistent dishonesty and a blatant disregard for the safeguards designed to protect the public.

But, said Dalton, the tribunal had seen during Norrish's evidence that he was "fully and genuinely remorseful," and had seen "fulsome" testimonials from colleagues.

"While it is customary for testimonials to favour a doctor submitting them, in this case they are striking in the unanimity and degree to which they speak to Mr Norrish's clinical excellence and personal integrity," said Dalton.

Colleagues called Norrish "an exceptional teacher," an "outstanding surgeon," and "consummate professional," who had undertaken extensive charity work abroad, including trauma surgery in Afghanistan. Dalton said the tribunal was in no doubt that his misconduct was "entirely extraordinary behaviour on his part."

Dalton added, "His course of conduct was initially occasioned because of Mr Norrish's ongoing willingness to take on voluminous work in order to help others. Then, having undertaken the wrong surgery, he embarked upon a calamitous course, one which he eventually self disclosed."

This warranted a "significant and severe sanction," said Dalton, but the tribunal "did not consider that Mr Norrish's behaviour, taken in context, was fundamentally incompatible with being a doctor."

A 12 month suspension is the most severe sanction a tribunal can impose short of erasure. Norrish, who has 28 days to appeal, will be expected to attend a review hearing before being allowed back on the register.