

Freedom of Information Act 2000 (FOIA)

Decision notice

Date: 24 March 2021

Public Authority: General Medical Council
Address: 3 Hardman Street
Manchester
M3 3AW

Decision (including any steps ordered)

1. The complainant has requested information from the General Medical Council ("the GMC") regarding complaints made about a specific doctor.
2. The Commissioner's decision is that the GMC is entitled to rely on section 40(5) to refuse to confirm or deny that it holds the information.
3. The Commissioner does not require the GMC to take any further action in this matter.

Request and response

4. On 11 June 2020, the complainant wrote to the GMC and requested information in the following terms:

"I have made a complaint about the above mentioned doctor to the GMC about an attack upon myself during which he threatened me with violence and was verbally and physically abusive, as I feared for my own personal safety I had to contact the police who have questioned him and warned him not to contact me. As this is so serious and the public need to be protected, in case he is alone with a patient in a consulting room and attacks the patient, I am asking to be informed if this Doctor has any other complaints made about his behaviour, so those who need to consider the seriousness of this situation can do so."

5. The GMC responded on 25 June 2020. It stated that it was unable to confirm nor deny that it holds the requested information. It explained

that the request was seeking the personal data of a third party and to confirm or deny it is held, would be a breach of the GDPR.

6. Following an internal review the GMC wrote to the complainant on 17 August 2020. It stated that it upheld its original response that it could not confirm or deny if the requested information is held.

Scope of the case

7. The complainant contacted the Commissioner 18 November 2020 to complain about the way their request for information had been handled.
8. The GMC set out in its internal review, why it considered, if the requested information were held, that it would be personal data and how disclosure of it would be unfair.
9. As the Commissioner is also the regulator of data protection legislation, she has decided that she has sufficient information to reach a decision in this case, based on the internal review arguments and her own expertise, without seeking further arguments from the GMC.
10. The Commissioner considers that the matter to be decided is whether the GMC is entitled to rely on section 40(5) to refuse to either confirm or deny it holds the requested information.

Reasons for decision

11. Section 1(1)(a) of FOIA provides that where a public authority receives a request for information, it is obliged to tell the applicant whether it holds that information. This is commonly known as the duty to confirm or deny.
12. There are however exemptions from the duty to confirm or deny. It should be noted that when applying an exemption from the duty to confirm or deny, a public authority is not restricted to only considering the consequences of the actual response that it would be required to provide under s1(1)(a). For example, if it does not hold the information, the public authority is not limited to only considering what would be revealed by denying the information was held, it can also consider the consequences if it had to confirm it did hold the information and vice versa.
13. Section 40(5B)(a)(i) of FOIA provides that the duty to confirm or deny does not arise if it would contravene any of the principles relating to the processing of personal data set out in Article 5 of the General Data

Protection Regulation EU2016/679 ('GDPR') to provide that confirmation or denial.

14. Therefore, for the GMC to be entitled to rely on section 40(5B) of FOIA to refuse to confirm or deny it holds information falling within the scope of the request the following two criteria must be met:

- Confirming or denying whether the requested information is held would constitute the disclosure of a third party's personal data;

and

- Providing this confirmation or denial would contravene one of the data protection principles.

Would the confirmation or denial that the requested information is held constitute the disclosure of a third party's personal data?

15. Section 3(2) of the DPA 2018 defines personal data as:

"any information relating to an identified or identifiable living individual".

16. The two main elements of personal data are that the information must relate to a living person and that the person must be identifiable.

17. Information will relate to a person if it is about them, linked to them, has biographical significance for them, is used to inform decisions affecting them or has them as its main focus.

18. The Commissioner is satisfied, from reviewing the request, that if the GMC were to either confirm or deny it held the information, it would involve the disclosure of personal data. The first criterion set out is therefore met.

19. The fact that confirming or denying whether the requested information is held would reveal the personal data of a third party (or parties) does not automatically prevent the GMC from refusing to confirm whether it holds this information. The second element of the test is to determine whether such a confirmation or denial would contravene any of the data protection principles.

20. The Commissioner considers that the most relevant data protection principle is principal (a).

Would confirming whether or not the requested information is held contravene one of the data protection principles?

21. Article 5(1)(a) GDPR states that:

“Personal data shall be processed lawfully, fairly and in a transparent manner in relation to the data subject”.

22. In the case of a FOIA request, the personal data is processed when it is disclosed in response to the request. This means that the information can only be disclosed – or as in this case, the public authority can only confirm whether or not it holds the requested information – if to do so would be lawful (i.e. it would meet one of the conditions of lawful processing listed in Article 6(1) GDPR), be fair and be transparent.

Lawful processing: Article 6(1)(f) GDPR

23. Article 6(1) of the GDPR specifies the requirements for lawful processing by providing that “processing shall be lawful only if and to the extent that at least one of the” conditions listed in the Article applies. One of the conditions in Article 6(1) must therefore be met before disclosure of the information in response to the request would be considered lawful.

24. The Commissioner considers that the condition most applicable on the facts of this case would be that contained in Article 6(1)(f) GDPR which provides as follows:

“processing is necessary for the purposes of the legitimate interests pursued by the controller or by a third party except where such interests are overridden by the interests or fundamental rights and freedoms of the data subject which require protection of personal data, in particular where the data subject is a child”¹.

25. In considering the application of Article 6(1)(f) GDPR in the context of a request for information under FOIA it is necessary to consider the following three-part-test:

(i) **Legitimate interest test:** Whether a legitimate interest is being pursued in the request for information;

¹ Article 6(1) goes on to state that:

“Point (f) of the first subparagraph shall not apply to processing carried out by public authorities in the performance of their tasks”.

However, section 40(8) FOIA (as amended by Schedule 19 Paragraph 58(8) DPA 2018) provides that:-

“In determining for the purposes of this section whether the lawfulness principle in Article 5(1)(a) of the GDPR would be contravened by the disclosure of information, Article 6(1) of the GDPR (lawfulness) is to be read as if the second sub-paragraph (dis-applying the legitimate interests gateway in relation to public authorities) were omitted”.

(ii) **Necessity test:** Whether confirming or denying that the requested information is held is necessary to meet the legitimate interest in question;

(iii) **Balancing test:** Whether the above interests override the legitimate interest(s) or fundamental rights and freedoms of the data subject(s).

26. The Commissioner considers that the test of "necessity" under stage (ii) must be met before the balancing test under stage (iii) is applied.

Legitimate interests

27. In considering any legitimate interests in confirming whether or not the requested information is held in response to a FOI request, the Commissioner recognises that such interests can include broad general principles of accountability and transparency for their own sake as well as case specific interests.

28. Further, a wide range of interests may be legitimate interests. They can be the requester's own interests or the interests of third parties, and commercial interests as well as wider societal benefits. They may be compelling or trivial, but trivial interests may be more easily overridden in the balancing test.

29. In this case, it is clear that the complainant is seeking the requested information due to an alleged incident between themselves and the named doctor and are wanting to see if the same or similar has happened previously.

30. The Commissioner is satisfied that there may be a wider legitimate interest, i.e transparency about the GMC's procedures when handling complaints, along with the safety of the general public and the competency of medical professionals.

Is confirming whether or not the requested information is held necessary?

31. 'Necessary' means more than desirable but less than indispensable or absolute necessity. Accordingly, the test is one of reasonable necessity which involves the consideration of alternative measures, and so confirming whether or not the requested information is held would not be necessary if the legitimate aim could be achieved by something less. Confirmation or denial under FOIA that the requested information is held must therefore be the least intrusive means of achieving the legitimate aim in question.

32. The Commissioner is satisfied in this case that there are no less intrusive means of achieving the legitimate aims identified.

Balance between legitimate interests and the data subject's interests or fundamental rights and freedoms

33. It is necessary to balance the legitimate interests in confirming whether or not the requested information is held against the data subject(s)' interests or fundamental rights and freedoms. In doing so, it is necessary to consider the impact of the confirmation or denial. For example, if a data subject would not reasonably expect the public authority to confirm whether or not it held the requested information in response to a FOI request, or if such a confirmation or denial would cause unjustified harm, their interests or rights are likely to override legitimate interests in confirming or denying whether information is held.
34. Disclosing whether the requested information was held would reveal whether or not an individual, who could be identified, had had complaints made about them throughout their career.
35. Whilst the Commissioner notes the complainant's argument that the information would assist with the prevention of crime, along with the safety of the public, information released under the FOIA is to the world at large. As the information relates to a living person and that person is identifiable, it is considered personal data and the individual would expect any complaints to be treated as confidential, should any such complaints exist.
36. The GMC has also explained, in their internal review response to the complainant, that only when a doctor is referred to a Fitness to Practice Tribunal hearing, or has their practice restricted in some way, would details about them become publicly available. The GMC also provided the complainant with a copy of its "Publication and Disclosure policy", which sets out disclosure expectation for all parties involved in a complaint.
37. Based on the above factors, the Commissioner has determined that there is insufficient legitimate interest to outweigh the data subjects' fundamental rights and freedoms, and that confirming whether or not the requested information is held would not be lawful.
38. The Commissioner has therefore decided that the GMC was entitled to refuse to confirm whether or not it held the requested information on the basis of section 40(4B)(a)(i) of the FOIA.

Right of appeal

39. Either party has the right to appeal against this decision notice to the First-tier Tribunal (Information Rights). Information about the appeals process may be obtained from:

First-tier Tribunal (Information Rights)
GRC & GRP Tribunals,
PO Box 9300,
LEICESTER,
LE1 8DJ

Tel: 0300 1234504
Fax: 0870 739 5836
Email: grc@justice.gov.uk
Website: www.justice.gov.uk/tribunals/general-regulatory-chamber

40. If you wish to appeal against a decision notice, you can obtain information on how to appeal along with the relevant forms from the Information Tribunal website.
41. Any Notice of Appeal should be served on the Tribunal within 28 (calendar) days of the date on which this decision notice is sent.

Signed

Phillip Angell
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