

**13 December 2023**

**Dear Professor Hawthorne,**

Re: Simulated Clinical Assessment Examination

In the first two weeks of November 2023, the Royal College of General Practitioners (RCGP) debuted its new online examination, the Simulated Clinical Assessment (SCA). GP registrars across the country worked hard in anticipation, dedicating countless hours after work revising and forgoing time with friends and family, with the aim of demonstrating their ability to become the GPs of tomorrow. They assumed they would be examined fairly, as one might expect for £1180 plus £423 in annual college fees. But for too many, this was simply not the case.

The RCGP has been forthright in detailing the third-party server outage which led to many GP registrars being ejected from their examination or being unable to communicate with invigilators on the afternoon of Tuesday 14th November. The College have stated that this was an unforeseeable event, and that the rest of the examination days were a success. However, the BMA GP Registrars Committee has received numerous correspondences of negative experiences throughout the November diet, but also in the aftermath. Those caught up in the problems of Tuesday 14th November fall into two categories:

1. Those who were ejected from the examination and thus unable to complete all 12 stations.
2. Those who weren't ejected from the examination, but nevertheless experienced difficulties and could not access help from the invigilators.

After weeks of uncertainty, the RCGP has now confirmed that the above candidates who have not accrued enough marks to pass will have this attempt voided, and not be charged for their resit. Pressure from candidates has also led the College to agree to provide feedback on incomplete examinations for those forced to wait until the earliest resit in January.

There is, however, a third group to whom the RCGP has offered little to no support:

3. Those who were examined on a different day to Tuesday 14th November who were unaffected by the server outage. They nevertheless reported a myriad of issues, from connectivity, software or audio dysfunction to problems arising from role player unprofessionalism.

The day of this examination was always going to be stressful for GP registrars. They had spent months dedicated to revision, with ever growing anticipation and anxiety for the desire to prove that they are ready to be a GP. Due to this pressure, the RCGP must recognise that any ostensibly small disruptions will have had a huge impact on candidate performance and morale in all subsequent stations. Whether a role player answers their personal phone or is washing dishes during the examination, or if the connection is recurrently interrupted during a station, the RCGP must have policies in place to protect the GP registrar. They have worked too hard to be failed by the examination format.

**Co-chief executive officers:** Neeta Major & Rachel Podolak

Registered as a Company limited by Guarantee. Registered No. 8848 England.  
Registered office: BMA House, Tavistock Square, London, WC1H 9JP.  
Listed as a Trade Union under the Trade Union and Labour Relations Act 1974.



The RCGP has made it clear that resits earlier than January are not possible. For this cohort who have been failed, they must prolong their revision over the festive period, cancel their travel plans, further sapping their energy drained already by their months of toil. For these individuals, subjected to unnecessary additional stress and work, the College is denying the need for financial compensation. The rationale is that this examination must be cost neutral to the College, and so any such compensation would have to come from the examination fees of other GP registrars. Many of our members find this argument an egregious avoidance of due accountability by the College. It is the College's responsibility to ensure a safe and fair examination. Compensation must therefore come from the College, not from blameless GP registrars.

The BMA GP Registrars Committee proposes the following changes to the strategy undertaken to ensure the SCA is a fair and reliable examination for our members:

1. Financial compensation for registrars forced to resit the November examination if they were unable to complete due to technical issues. This would represent an acknowledgement of the impact that this disruption has had on their lives, including extra hours of work, extra hours of stress and extra hours of childcare to facilitate yet more revision.
2. A transparent procedural difficulties policy. This must include software and connectivity issues on the part of the College and the host GP practice as well as role player unprofessionalism.
  - a. It should recognise the impact of system errors on the station in question and subsequent stations.
  - b. A candidate impacted by the above issues should have their examination voided if insufficient marks for an overall pass - because they are not at fault.
3. Clear actions to address role player unprofessionalism, including a code of conduct. Many registrars have called for role players to be housed in a professional centre, not dialling in from home, to standardise hardware and behaviour.

2023 is already a difficult time to be training in general practice. The pressure on us to deliver more and more care in the face of rising demand but stagnant investment is undeniably taxing. Burnout is high, and retention is low. The RCGP's General Election manifesto supports action to retain the GP workforce, but episodes such as these, where GP registrars' expectations that they will be examined fairly are not met, undermines their goodwill and sense of value within the NHS.

We would like to support the RCGP with improving the SCA and reducing the burgeoning mistrust amongst registrars, because we want GP registrars to have confidence that they will be examined fairly. However, the College must recognise the true extent of the failings of the November diet and take decisive action with due accountability.

The RCGP has demonstrated its desire to engage with GP registrars, by agreeing to mark incomplete examinations and by acting on our suggestion to meet with affected registrars online, but this is not enough. The BMA GP Registrars Committee requests that the RCGP takes our suggestions on board in order to restore the faltering faith in both the SCA examination and the College. We look forward to meeting to discuss these concerns further.

Yours sincerely,



**Dr Malinga Ratwatte**  
Chair, BMA GP Registrars Committee



**Dr Elliott Philips**  
Deputy Chair, BMA GP Registrars Committee