

## Substance use disorders & professionalism FAQ

### Can I still study as a medical or graduate student if I have a substance use disorder?

Yes. Having a substance abuse problem (either active or in remission) in and of itself does not prohibit an individual from continuing school responsibilities. Seeking help voluntarily does not mean studies must be put on hold or a leave of absence is required. Students and trainees are always encouraged to seek help for a substance use disorder before it leads to unprofessional behaviour. Students seeking help will be treated with confidentiality.

The Faculty of Medicine seeks to provide support for students' and trainees' well-being and success. Should the Faculty of Medicine become involved (e.g. through reporting of a professionalism lapse or via academic concerns), every effort will be made to maintain student's enrolment and progress in the program and reasonable accommodations will be explored.

*For medical students: \*As Ontario undergraduate medical students are not members of the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Ontario (CPSO), the CPSO does not regulate complaints regarding medical student behaviour and performance during medical school. It will however consider breaches of good character under section 2 of the regulation during application to residency [in Ontario](#). \**

### For residents and fellows:

### Can I still practice as a licensed resident/physician if I have a substance use disorder?

Once students complete their undergraduate medical training, they must register with the licensing authority of their province of residency for the College of Physicians and Surgeons. In Ontario, to obtain a certificate of registration, first-time applicants must complete the Postgraduate Education Application Form. On this form, there are questions concerning whether applicants are currently abusing, dependent on or addicted to alcohol or drugs; whether they have ever abused/been dependent or addicted to alcohol or drugs in the past; and finally whether they have been treated for the abuse/dependence or addiction. If applicants answer yes to any of these questions, the CPSO would still consider issuing a certificate of registration, but, under direction of the Registration committee, could stipulate a condition that the applicant meet with the provinces Physician Health Program (in Ontario this is the Ontario Medical Association Physician Health Program) for an assessment. To date, no application has ever been declined due to self-declaration of substance abuse or addiction.

Once registered with the CPSO, practicing physicians are required to complete an annual questionnaire to maintain their membership status. The annual renewal form contains a question, which focuses on whether physicians have an addiction or substance use

problem, newly identified in the past year, for which they are not currently enrolled in the Ontario Medical Association Physician Health Program (OMA PHP).

**At what point does drug/alcohol use become a problem? What is acceptable and what is not?**

Identifying that you or a peer is at risk for a substance abuse issue or addiction can be challenging. It is often difficult to differentiate social from problem use. More information and tools to help identify problem behaviour may be found on the [resource page](#) for substance use and disorders.

**Where can I get professional help at the Faculty of Medicine for a substance use disorder?**

**RESIDENTS, CLINICAL FELLOWS, CLINICAL FACULTY MEMBERS (MD | Ph.D)**

- **Faculty Wellness Program (FWP)** – [wellness@uottawa.ca](mailto:wellness@uottawa.ca) | 613-562-5800 ext. 8507  
The professional counsellor or the Assistant Dean Wellness will meet with the trainee or faculty to conduct an initial assessment and decide if a follow-up is required and if needed can help connect with external supports. The FWP abides by a strict confidentiality agreement that outlines the limited conditions warranting a breach of confidentiality. These conditions include the need to disclose information to prevent serious risk of harm to self or others.
- **Ontario Medical Association Physician Health Program (OMA PHP) – 1-800-851-6606**  
A resident, clinical fellow or clinical faculty member can self-refer to the OMA PHP. The OMA PHP provides a range of confidential direct services to support physicians, residents and medical students including difficulties with substance abuse and addiction. In some cases, the individual and the OMA PHP may enter into a mutually agreed upon monitoring agreement (i.e. a contract) which outlines treatment and recovery steps to be taken, and circumstances and contingencies regarding breach of the contract. Monitoring by OMA PHP includes having your file followed by a case manager and ensuring access to appropriate community resources. The OMA PHP will also facilitate access to resources whether or not the individual is being officially monitored. Where one acknowledges substance abuse and agrees to engage with the OMA PHP, including being monitored, the OMA PHP will not automatically breach confidentiality or disclose any information. However, certain conditions may be agreed upon in the voluntary monitoring agreement which may include reporting as a condition should the contract be broken.
- **Family Physician.** In the event that you do not have a family doctor, please contact the [University of Ottawa Health Services](#).
- **Employee and Family Assistance Program**

- CHEO – [Homewood Health](#)
- The Ottawa Hospital – [Morneau Shepell](#)
- Royal Hospital – [Morneau Shepell](#)
- Bruyere Continuing Care – [Morneau Shepell](#)
- Montfort Hospital – [Morneau Shepell](#)

## UNDERGRADUATE MEDICAL STUDENTS

- **Student Affairs Office (SAO):** [medsao@uottawa.ca](mailto:medsao@uottawa.ca) | 613-562-5800 ext. 8136

A professional counsellor or the Assistant Dean Undergraduate Affairs will meet with the student to conduct an initial assessment and decide if follow-up should be done at SAO or through external health care services. The SAO abides by a strict confidentiality agreement that outlines the limited conditions warranting a breach of confidentiality. These conditions include the need to disclose information to prevent serious risk of harm to self or others.

- **Ontario Medical Association Physician Health Program** - 1-800-851-6606

A medical student can voluntarily self-refer to the OMA PHP. The individual and the OMA PHP may enter into a mutually agreed upon monitoring agreement (i.e. a contract) which outlines treatment and recovery steps to be taken, and circumstances and contingencies regarding breach of the contract. Monitoring by OMA PHP includes having your file followed by a case manager and ensuring access to appropriate community resources. The OMA PHP will also facilitate access to resources whether or not a student is being officially monitored. Where one acknowledges substance abuse and agrees to engage with the PHP, including being monitored, the OMA PHP will not automatically breach confidentiality or disclose any information to the Faculty. However, certain conditions may be agreed upon in the voluntary monitoring agreement which may include reporting as a condition should the contract be broken.

- **Family Physician** In the event that you do not have a family doctor, please contact the [University of Ottawa Health Services](#).

## GRADUATE STUDENTS, TMM STUDENTS AND POST-DOCTORAL FELLOWS, BASIC SCIENCE FACULTY

- **Faculty Wellness Program (FWP)**

The professional counsellor or the Assistant Dean Wellness will meet with the student, trainee or faculty to conduct an initial assessment and decide if a follow-up is required and if needed can help connect with external supports. The FWP abides by a strict confidentiality agreement that outlines the limited conditions warranting a breach of confidentiality. These conditions include the need to disclose information to prevent serious risk of harm to self or others.

- **Family Physician** In the event that you do not have a family doctor, please contact the [University of Ottawa Health Services](#).
- **Employee and Family Assistance Program**
  - [Morneau Shepell](#)

### **What is the CPSO's Mandatory and Permissive Reporting Policy and how does it apply to residents, clinical fellows and physicians?**

Medical practitioners are expected to remain professional and maintain confidentiality. As set out in the CPSO's *Mandatory and Permissive Reporting Policy*, the CPSO expects physicians to take appropriate and timely action when they have reasonable grounds to believe that another physician or health care professional is incapacitated. This duty is grounded in professionalism, and the objective is to ensure patient [safety](#).

### **What happens if someone reports me at the Faculty of Medicine?**

If unprofessional or problem behaviour is identified and reported to the Faculty of Medicine, all reports are handled on a case-by-case basis and are followed up and managed by the responsible Vice-Dean and or their delegates, as applicable. The Vice-Dean may determine that the lapses are sufficiently serious to require remediation.

The remediation process generally involves a series of meetings with the responsible Vice-Dean and/or delegate. The objective of the process is to ensure that the student or trainee has insight into the professionalism lapses and has developed strategies to prevent future lapses. In the case of substance abuse, these strategies will likely include continuing preventive supports (such as counselling). The student must pass the remediation and avoid repeated lapses in order to graduate.

- **Undergraduate Medical Students:** The CPSO is not involved in complaints regarding undergraduate medical student behaviour and performance. However, the CPSO may consider events regarding behaviour and performance during time of application for postgraduate license.
- **Graduate Students:** Complaints are treated according to the guidelines in section 5 and Section 7 of the Faculty of Medicine's [Professionalism policy](#). Incidents where health and safety in the laboratory setting are in jeopardy will be deemed more serious lapses in professionalism.

- **Basic Science Faculty Members:** The incident is forwarded to the Dean of the Faculty of Medicine. The allegations are then investigated as per the APUO collective agreement.

The University of Ottawa, Occupational health and safety developed a document which speaks to the Legalization of Cannabis and managing substance use in the work place.

[https://www.uottawa.ca/human-resources/sites/www.uottawa.ca.human-resources/files/legalization\\_cannabis\\_supervisors\\_duties.pdf](https://www.uottawa.ca/human-resources/sites/www.uottawa.ca.human-resources/files/legalization_cannabis_supervisors_duties.pdf)

- **Residents or Clinical Faculty MD:** Each workplace (i.e. hospital, community practice, etc.) has their own policy on dealing with workplace complaints. There are mandatory reporting obligations that apply in certain employment settings when there are reasonable grounds to believe that a regulated health professional is incapacitated. It should be emphasized that the CPSO only gets involved when CPSO members (residents and physicians) are involved in a complaint; this does not include medical students. Should the CPSO receive a complaint or report regarding physician incapacity through a third party (e.g. employer, patient, etc.), the CPSO will open an investigation, which may result in direct follow up with the physician and/or eventual monitoring through the PHP. An investigation includes gathering facts and consulting with health professionals and patients directly involved with the complaint. Once the CPSO becomes directly involved due to problem behaviour, (i.e. if a physician chooses not to voluntarily seek help and workplace safety is impaired) physicians will no longer have the right to recover privately, on their own terms, and they become accountable for follow-up.

Ultimately, the CPSO seeks to ensure patient safety, to ensure the physician receives treatment and care, and to keep the physician in practice.

### **What are the limits to privacy and confidentiality?**

In cases where students, trainees or physicians self-present for help to the FWP, the SAO, privacy and confidentiality is strictly kept unless it is determined there is an immediate and serious risk of harm to self or others including patients.

### **Can I be removed from my program or profession?**

Students and trainees are supported and every effort is made to maintain enrolment. Specific measures and accommodations are made on a case-by-case basis, with both student wellness, patient safety, and recovery as the focus.

*For undergraduate medical students, residents and physicians: \*To date there has never been a case where the CPSO has revoked a physician's license due to a substance use disorder alone. However, if there are other multiple and severe lapses in professionalism or the physician is uncooperative in receiving help, the CPSO can suspend or revoke a physician's license. Revocation or suspension is a last resort and every effort is made to keep the physician in practice.\**

## **Can a substance abuse problem affect my residency application/match (CaRMS)?**

No. The residency match (CaRMS) is independent and uninformed by the MD Program, the PHP, or the CPSO regarding any student's personal health problems.

### **Other resources:**

- **Ottawa Public Health Listing of local addiction supports**  
<https://www.ottawapublichealth.ca/en/public-health-topics/mental-health-and-addiction-services.aspx>
- **Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH)** – 1-416-535-8501 or 1-800-463-2338
- **Ontario Medical Association Physician Health Program (OMA PHP)** -1-866-435-7362
- **Canadian Medical Protective Association (CMPA)** – 1-800-267-6522