

Augusta University
House Staff Policies and Procedures

Policy	Source
HS 35.0 Impairment/Fitness for Participation Policy	Graduate Medical Education Office

1.0 Purpose

A definition of IMPAIRMENT for purposes of this policy: A physical or mental condition, which causes a resident/fellow to be unable to practice medicine with reasonable care and safety commensurate with their level of training.

A definition of FITNESS FOR PARTICIPATION for purposes of this policy: An evaluation in which an approved professional meets with a trainee, potentially performing tests/exams, and provides a written assessment about a resident/fellow's fitness to participate in the prescribed residency/fellowship-training curriculum.

2.0 Policy Statement

Impairment of performance by physicians can put patients at risk. Impairment will be managed as a medical/behavioral illness. Implicit in this concept is the existence of criteria permitting diagnosis, opportunity for treatment, and, with successful progress toward recovery, the possibility of returning to training in an appropriate capacity.

Impairment may result from mental health disorders or behavioral problems, physical impairment, medical illness, and/or substance abuse and consequent chemical dependency. Untreated or relapsing impairment is not compatible with safe clinical performance. The goals of this policy are:

- To prevent or minimize the occurrence of impairment, including substance abuse, among residents and fellows at Medical College of Georgia at Augusta University and Affiliated Hospitals.
- To protect patients from risks associated with care given by an impaired resident/fellow physician.
- To compassionately confront problems of impairment to effect diagnosis, relief from patient care responsibilities if necessary, treatment as indicated, and appropriate rehabilitation.
- In achieving these goals, several principles are involved:
 - The safety of the patients, staff, and colleagues are important with safe care of patients being a priority.
 - The privacy and dignity of the affected individual should be maintained to the fullest extent possible.
 - The Augusta University Employee-Faculty Assistance Program will help facilitate education, diagnosis, and management.

3.0 Signs and Symptoms of Impairment

Signs and symptoms of impairment may include, without limitation, the following:

- Physical signs such as fatigue, deterioration in personal hygiene and appearance, multiple physical complaints, accidents, eating disorders, etc.
- Disturbance in family stability or evidence of personal or professional relationship difficulties with resulting isolation.
- Social changes such as withdrawal from outside activities, isolation from peers, embarrassing or inappropriate behavior, adverse interactions with police, driving while intoxicated or under the influence, undependability and unpredictability, aggressive behavior, argumentativeness, or unusual financial problems.
- Professional behavior patterns such as unexplained absences, spending excessive time at the hospital, tardiness, decreasing quality or interest in work, inappropriate orders, behavioral changes, altered interaction with other staff, inadequate professional performance, or significant change in well-established work habits.
- Behavioral signs such as mood changes, depression, slowness, lapses of attention, chronic exhaustion, risk taking behavior, excessive cheerfulness, flat affect, etc.

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- Signs of drug use or alcohol abuse such as excessive agitation or edginess, dilated or pinpoint pupils, self-medication with psychotropic drugs, stereotypical behavior, alcohol on breath at work, uncontrolled drinking at social events, blackouts, binge drinking, changes in attire (e.g., wearing of long sleeve garments by parenteral drug users), etc.

Evaluations documenting substandard academic performance or other grounds for consideration by the residency/fellowship program director existing in conjunction with one or more sign(s) or symptom(s) of impairment, such as those listed above, may be considered in determining whether or not medical/psychiatric evaluation of the resident/fellow is needed.

4.0 Procedure

4.1 Education

In an attempt to minimize the incidence of impairment, residents/ fellows are educated about physician impairment, including identification of the symptoms of burnout, depression, and substance abuse, including means to assist those who experience these conditions. This education also includes educating residents/fellows and faculty in how to recognize those symptoms in themselves, and how to seek appropriate care if applicable. Education is also provided regarding problems of substance abuse, its incidence and nature, and risks both to the involved individuals and patients.

4.2 Counseling

The Augusta University Employee-Faculty Assistance Program will provide individual counseling both to supervisors and to individuals in need. In the latter case, reasonable efforts will be made to maintain confidentiality, subject to any reporting requirements imposed by law. However, program directors must be made aware of the resident's/fellow's ability to safely re-enter the training program and patient care activities by the treating provider(s).

4.3 Assessment

Evaluation of impaired status: For both new residents/fellows with a history of impairment and current residents/fellows who experience impairment and/or for whom evidence of substance abuse exists, assessment of impairment will be performed under the auspices of the Augusta University Employee-Faculty Assistance Program in consultation with the appropriate program director and the Designated Institutional Official to determine appropriate care and monitoring.

4.4 Management:

- Each program director, after consultation with appropriate resources at Augusta University, is responsible for certifying the functional status of all residents/fellows and for judging whether functional impairment exists in an individual. When an individual with impairment is identified, the residency/fellowship program director will report this to the Designated Institutional Official.
- Each resident/fellow, as a condition of employment, agrees to accept the decision of the program director. Should the program director conclude, after consultation with the Augusta University Employee-Faculty Assistance Program and other appropriate individuals, that a resident/fellow is suffering from impairment, including substance abuse, they must immediately take appropriate action, which may include placing the impaired individual on a leave of absence with or without disciplinary action from the training program. This disciplinary action may include formal remediation, probation, dismissal, or non-renewal. HS3.0, HS13.0 and HS18.0 will be followed.
- Appropriate action may also require medical and/or psychiatric evaluation by a professional of the institution's choosing with the assistance of the Augusta University Employee-Faculty Assistance Program. The sponsoring institution will use its best effort to select a physician and/or psychologist acceptable to the resident/fellow.
- A written Return to Work Agreement with the resident/fellow and the Program may be required. In this case, return from leave of absence for impairment shall be based upon written recommendations of an approved treatment program and agreement of the program director.

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4.5 Reporting Process


All medical personnel have a duty, in part required by ethical concern for the well-being of patients and one's fellow professionals and in part as mandated by state law, to report in confidence concerns about possible impairment both in themselves and in others to an appropriate supervisor.

If a resident/fellow is observed to be impaired/disabled while engaged in the performance of their duties, the course of action shall be as follows:

- The observer shall report their concern immediately to a responsible supervisor, ultimately the residency/fellowship program director.
- When impairment is suspected, the program director shall seek assistance from the Designated Institutional Official and The Augusta University Employee-Faculty Assistance Program. The Designated Institutional Official and The Augusta University Employee-Faculty Assistance Program will ascertain the need for help, and facilitate an intervention leading to further professional evaluation and possible inpatient or outpatient treatment. Under such circumstances, further professional evaluation may be required, including a physician and/or psychologist evaluation.
- The program director will notify the Designated Institutional Official, The Augusta University Employee-Faculty Assistance Program, and appropriate officials. In consultation, a decision will be made regarding any leave of absence and, 1) information will be made available to the resident/fellow on the effects the leave of absence will have upon training and, 2) an evaluation will be made of the need to report such a leave of absence to the Georgia Composite Medical Board if training is interrupted for more than 15 days and the resident/fellow has a temporary training permit.
- Appropriate and complete documentation of the actions taken shall be performed and maintained. Such documentation shall be permanently retained and filed securely and separately from the records of the resident/fellow.
- Should a resident/fellow about whom concern has been expressed, be determined by the sponsoring institution not to be impaired, the individual will be allowed to return to the residency/fellowship program without prejudice, provided that they are capable of performing their duties with reasonable care and safety commensurate with their level of training.
- Should a resident/fellow dispute the findings made or actions taken under this Policy, they shall follow the Due Process and Resident Grievance Policy to resolve the disputed issues (HS13.0).


5.0 Use of Psychoactive Drugs by Residents/Fellows

- Use of controlled substances must be by prescription of a non-family member physician. Non-prescribed use of controlled substances is illegal. A controlled substance or prescription substance, when taken, should not alter the resident's/fellow's ability to competently perform patient care. Non-prescribed use of non-controlled psychotropic drugs is inappropriate. Evidence of such use will result in evaluation for possible treatment and may be grounds for immediate probation, non-renewal, or dismissal.
- For the purpose of this policy, use of alcohol during working hours, and particularly when one is engaged in patient care, is completely inappropriate. When one is "on call", any use of alcohol that either produces or appears to produce (e.g. odor of alcohol on breath) evidence of behavioral impairment is also regarded as inappropriate.
- All residents/fellows, as employees of Augusta University, will be subject to the drug screening guidelines of the institution. These guidelines are specifically articulated in the employment policies of each affiliated hospital. Augusta University and GME reserve the right to perform drug screening if a resident/fellow's presence, behavior, or performance suggests intoxication or illegal drug use. Moreover, residents/fellows must adhere to drug screening guidelines for hospitals/sites where they care of patients in order to maintain privileges at these hospitals/sites. Please see HS1.0.



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