

BEST ACHIEVING
COUNCIL OF THE YEAR 2010



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Dear Mr Dickson

Peninsula College of Medicine and Dentistry

You will be aware of the announcement in January 2012 by the Universities of Exeter and Plymouth that the Peninsula College of Medicine and Dentistry is to demerge. I am writing to you to request the support of the General Medical Council in helping to address significant failings in the way that this decision was made, and in ensuring that future medical school arrangements for the region are both sustainable and in the best interests of medical students and other major stakeholders.

Plymouth City Council welcomed the report and recommendations of the LGA Health Commission that you chaired in 2008 prior to taking up your role at the GMC. We have built strong health partnerships in the city, based on transparency and engagement that are delivering significant outcomes for our citizens, both within the city and the sub region. It is especially important therefore, that we are supported in holding the universities to account for a decision making process that does not demonstrate local accountability. As you point out in your report, 'if providers are not held to account, then the system is not accountable'.

The Council's Adult Health and Social Care Overview and Scrutiny Panel met on the 4 April to discuss the demerger plans. The Vice Chancellors of both universities were present, as was the Dean of the College, the Interim Chief Executive of Plymouth Hospitals NHS Trust and myself. The panel had requested specific assurances that:

- There had been sufficient dialogue with key stakeholders prior to the decision being taken to demerge the College
- The long term viability of two separate schools of medicine in such close proximity could be assured
- The reputational value of the existing College amongst potential students would be maintained under proposed new arrangements
- The proposed demerger best fulfils the regional and national ambitions of the city

With respect to the first point, it was clear that no meaningful consultation had taken place with key stakeholders prior to the announcement that the demerger was to take place. The panel heard that

the Acute Trust, the Local Medical Council, the city's Shadow Health and Wellbeing Board, Members of Parliament for both Plymouth and Exeter and both Cornwall and Plymouth Councils had all been presented with a 'fait accompli' by the universities that the demerger was to take place, without a request for views or concerns to be taken into account. Indeed, the Vice Chancellor of Exeter University stated at the Panel meeting that the demerger was 'a done deal' as far as he was concerned. All the above stakeholders have since raised reservations about the wisdom of the proposal. Particularly importantly, the Chair of the panel has since heard from the student body of the College, thanking her for raising the issue and expressing disappointment at the lack of engagement by the universities with students over the issue. Of 600 students surveyed on the issue, 91% had expressed opposition to the demerger.

We have yet to hear convincing evidence about the long term viability of two separate schools of medicine within such close proximity. With public resources for higher education at a growing premium, it seems unlikely that funding assurances can be given with respect to two schools to match our sub regional planning horizons to 2026.

Both Vice Chancellors agreed that the existing college enjoys a first class reputation among former and current students, and is of national and international standing. Unsurprisingly, neither was able to give categorical assurances that the new arrangements would do anything other than divide and dissipate that reputation.

You will be aware that Plymouth, as the fifteenth largest city in the UK is a key driver for both economic growth and improved health outcomes in the region. It is not clear whether any of the demographic, employment or public health implications relating to this decision were considered, much less shared or debated with any key stakeholders prior to it being made. Whilst respecting the autonomy of higher education institutions, I believe that it is not becoming of the universities to fail to engage in proper dialogue with strategic partners prior to making decisions of strategic importance to the peninsula.

At a meeting of the full City Council on 16 April, the following recommendation was made to the Vice Chancellors of the University of Exeter and Plymouth University: that

- There is an immediate pause in the process of demerging the Peninsula College of Medicine and Dentistry
- A 12 week consultation exercise is undertaken, in line with the Government's published code of practice for consultation
- An options appraisal detailing alternatives to the demerging of PCMD is made available during the consultation period

In addition, I have been mandated, as Chief Executive of the Council to raise the matter with the Secretary of State for Health and the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills for review in the event of the recommendation not being actioned.

You will see from the above that there is an overwhelming desire by a significant number of key stakeholders to be properly and meaningfully engaged in the decision making process concerning the PCMD. I am formally and respectfully requesting that the General Medical Council acknowledge the requirement that consultation as set out above should take place and is properly considered before any approval is given to demerged schools of medicine at the two universities.

I am happy to discuss the above, or provide further details of our deliberations if you would find that helpful, but in any case look forward to your urgent response to my request.

Yours sincerely

B A Keel
Chief Executive