

A CLEAN BILL OF HEALTH

As demands for medical checks on certificate holders increase, Honorary Solicitor **Laura Saunbury** offers some practical tips on how to navigate your way through this process.

Over the past 12 months gun owners have seen a gradual shift from the police making routine medical checks with their GP, to placing the burden on the individual to obtain a full medical report. However, despite the best efforts of the CPSA and other national shooting organisations to resist its implementation as a blanket measure in all cases, I fear this requirement is here to stay.

Currently, nine out of the 43 police forces in England and Wales require every applicant to obtain a 'medical verification report' from their GP before they will even begin to consider any application for the grant or renewal of a shotgun/firearm certificate. Indeed, the Home Office recently concluded a consultation exercise on draft statutory guidance to the police which would make it a requirement for all police forces to adopt this approach. I therefore cannot offer any reassurance that this intractable problem is going to go away. The purpose of this article is rather to suggest some practical tips which might assist members in overcoming this hurdle to renewal.

The biggest issues are of course the huge variation in fees charged by doctors (anything from £30 up to £350), plus those GPs or whole surgeries which refuse to co-operate in the process on the grounds of conscientious objection to the private ownership of firearms. Some steps you might wish to consider in tackling these problems include:

- Don't wait until your renewal to broach the subject with your GP. The earlier you raise it the more time this will give

you to discover the options.

- Try to always see the same doctor at the surgery. This should help them to get to know you better, which may alleviate their reservations about providing a report in connection with your ownership of guns.

- If your GP asserts conscientious objection, politely ask him to explain the rationale for this. Your doctor's response may demonstrate common misconceptions about shooting, which

you can then correct. For example, if his aversion is to the hunting of wild animals, tell him if in fact your interest lies purely in shooting at artificial targets.

- Point out the benefits of shooting for your mental and physical wellbeing. Like any other sport, it involves exercise, fresh air, social interaction, and the motivation of aiming for personal or team goals.
- Your doctor may be concerned he could potentially be held responsible for the decision to grant you a certificate. If so, emphasise that his role

is limited to providing factual medical information from your records. The police should not be asking your doctor to express an opinion on whether it is medically safe for you to have possession of firearms. That decision lies solely with the police.

- Explore to what extent it's possible to find another GP practice to register with locally. You may not want to change GP and shouldn't have to. However, making enquiries may enable you to demonstrate to your own GP practice and the police that you have been put in a very unfair position as all other local

GP surgeries are either not taking on new patients or similarly are citing conscientious objection as a basis to not participate in the process. If necessary, remind the police that the Home Office guidance expressly states 'certificate holders should not be disadvantaged by a GP's refusal to provide medical information'.

- If your medical history is relatively straightforward, then a fee of anything up to £60 from your GP surgery is probably reasonable. Ask for a written explanation of fees in excess of that level.
- Always request a copy of the report submitted to the police so you can satisfy yourself it is accurate. If the surgery is reluctant to supply it, point out you can make a subject access request which will require them to disclose all of your medical records.
- If there is continued refusal from your GP to supply a report for this purpose, and the police will not progress your application without it, consider approaching MedCert (medcert.co.uk, as featured in last month's issue) to obtain and review your medical records. This is a very new service in its infancy, and it remains to be seen to what extent police forces will accept reports from a doctor other than the applicant's own GP.

SHARE YOUR EXPERIENCE...

The CPSA continues to engage with the Home Office and doctors governing bodies via the British Shooting Sports Council (BSSC) to try to secure clearer and fairer guidance which will simplify the process for certificate holders and also bring greater consistency, both in terms of the information to be required from doctors, and the appropriate fees for them to charge. The CPSA therefore welcomes member feedback on your experiences to help inform the ongoing debate.



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