

# **Annual Report of the Preliminary Proceedings Committee 2023**

## Foreword

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The Preliminary Proceedings Committee (the “PPC”) established under the Pharmacy Act 2007 (the “Act”) is pleased to present its 14<sup>th</sup> annual report covering the calendar year of 2023.

The PPC performs a vital function on behalf of the Pharmaceutical Society of Ireland (the “PSI”), the pharmacy profession and most importantly, the public. The PPC considers whether further action is warranted when complaints are received concerning registered pharmacists and registered retail pharmacy businesses (“pharmacies”) and, where appropriate, refers complaints for mediation or for inquiry before either the Professional Conduct Committee or Health Committee.

There were 11 meetings of the PPC during 2023 compared to the typical schedule of 8 meetings per annum. Supplementary meetings were convened to ensure that all complaints were dealt with as expeditiously as possible.

During 2023, the PPC considered 77 complaints, compared to 52 in 2022.

An important function of the PPC is to keep its knowledge and information up to date regarding professional regulation. The PPC received training in this regard during 2023.

This Annual Report outlines the work of the PPC and highlights to the Council of the PSI any comments and observations that the PPC may have following on from its consideration of the complaints received throughout 2023. It also aims to inform the public and the profession on the role and the learnings of the PPC arising from the performance of its statutory functions.

As Chairperson, I would like to commend the PPC for its response to adapting to meetings being held in a hybrid manner, and I would also like to thank the Executive for its support in this respect.

Signed:  \_\_\_\_\_

**Chairperson of the Preliminary Proceedings Committee**

## Introduction

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This report is prepared and approved by the PPC and covers the period 1 January 2023 to 31 December 2023. The purpose of this report is to provide to the Council of the PSI, together with members of the profession and the public, information on the role of the PPC and other matters relating to the discharge of its functions. It is also used to report any trends observed by the PPC over the course of the performance of its statutory functions and to make recommendations for important learnings that may improve pharmacy practice in Ireland.

## Legislative Background

Provision for investigation of complaints and the holding of inquiries is set out in Part 6 of the Act. Specifically, section 34 of the Act empowered the Council of the PSI to establish the PPC. Sections 38, 40 and 44 of the Act set out the salient functions and powers of the PPC in relation to the consideration of complaints. Please see Appendix A, which sets out the applicable sections of the Act.

## Membership and Composition of the PPC during 2023

### Non-Pharmacists

Mr. Hugo Bonar  
Ms. Molly Buckley  
Ms. Geraldine Campbell (Council Representative)  
Mr. Richard Hammond SC (Deputy Chairperson) (appointed to Council November 2023)  
Mr. Graham Knowles (Council Representative)  
Ms. Jill Long (appointed as Chairperson in October 2023)  
Ms. Cindy J Mackie  
Mr. John Murray  
Dr. Shane McCarthy (Chairperson)  
Ms. Karen Ruddy BL

### Pharmacists

Mr. Derek Fehily MPSI  
Ms. Breda Heneghan MPSI  
Mr. John Hillery MPSI  
Mr. Garvan Lynch MPSI  
Ms. Fiona Rowland MPSI  
Ms. Áine Shine MPSI

### Retirements

Mr. Garvan Lynch MPSI  
Ms. Breda Heneghan MPSI  
Mr. Graham Knowles  
Dr. Shane McCarthy  
Ms. Geraldine Campbell

### New Members

Mr. James Begg MPSI

Mr. Achal Gupta MPSI

Dr. John Lombard

Mr. Mark McPhillips MPSI

### New Appointments

Ms. Jill Long was appointed Chair.

Mr. Hugo Bonar was appointed Deputy Chair.

### Executive of the PSI

The PPC is supported in its work by the Executive comprising trained PSI employees.

### Legal Advisor to the PPC

In 2023, independent legal advice was provided to the PPC by Fieldfisher Ireland.

### Role of the PPC

The PSI is the statutory regulator for pharmacists and pharmacies in Ireland, and the principal function of the PSI is set out in Section 7 of the Act as follows:

*“to regulate the profession of pharmacy in the State having regard to the need to protect, maintain and promote the health and safety of the public”.*

The PSI carries out this role through the Council of the PSI and through various committees established by the Council. The PPC is one of these committees and forms part of the disciplinary structure of the PSI. Under the Act, the PPC is the initial committee to receive complaints regarding registered pharmacists and pharmacies. The PPC considers each complaint and advises the Council on whether there is sufficient cause to warrant further action being taken. It is not the function of the PPC to establish that a complaint has been proven or otherwise.

The PPC is aware that it must act in a considered and expeditious manner while ensuring its actions are lawful, fair, and in conformity with the principles of natural justice.

### Consideration of the Complaint<sup>1</sup>

Before arriving at its advice to the Council on whether there is sufficient cause to warrant further action in relation to a particular complaint, the PPC will consider whether the complaint is trivial, vexatious, or made in bad faith.

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<sup>1</sup> In considering complaints the PPC must do so in accordance with the provisions of the Act which sets out the actions it is authorised to take. For the purposes of this Annual Report, only complaints in which a final decision was given by the PPC in 2023 are reported on.

When considering a complaint, the PPC will also ensure, amongst other matters, that it has sufficient information to process the complaint. To do this, it may be necessary for the PPC to request a party to a complaint to provide further information. Once the PPC is satisfied that it has sufficient information to consider a complaint, it will decide whether:

- (a) There is sufficient cause to warrant further action or
- (b) There is not sufficient cause to warrant further action.

In deciding whether there is sufficient cause for further action and the complaint relates to a once-off error or failing, the PPC will consider whether it meets the threshold of “seriousness” as set down in the case of ***Corbally v Medical Council & Ors [2015] IESC 9***.

#### Sufficient Cause to Warrant Further Action

Where the PPC has decided that there is sufficient cause to warrant further action being taken in relation to a complaint, it will either:

1. Refer the complaint for mediation, if appropriate, and subject to the consent of the complainant and the pharmacist(s) and/or pharmacy against whom the complaint has been made; or
2. Refer the complaint to the Professional Conduct Committee for inquiry or
3. Refer the complaint to the Health Committee for inquiry.

#### Not Sufficient Cause to Warrant Further Action

Where the PPC forms the view that there is not sufficient cause to warrant further action following a complaint against a respondent, the following steps will be taken:

1. The PPC refers the complaint and the advice of the PPC in relation to the complaint to the Council.
2. The Council will consider the advice of the PPC.
3. If the Council disagree with the PPC’s advice and decides to take further action in relation to a complaint, the matter is referred again to the PPC, who must then refer the complaint to mediation or for inquiry or
4. If the Council agrees with the advice of the PPC, no further action is taken, and the complaint concludes.

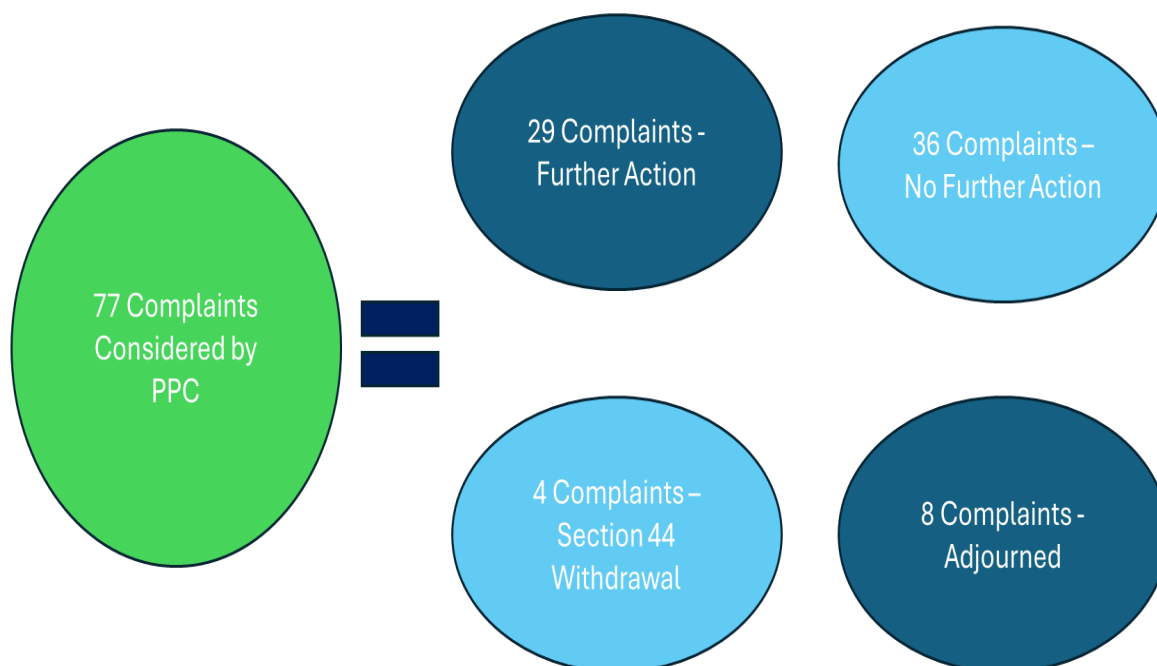
#### Activities from 1 January 2023 to 31 December 2023

In 2023, the PPC held 11 meetings to consider complaints made by members of the public, pharmacists, other organisations and the Registrar of the PSI against registered pharmacists and pharmacies.

The PPC considered a total of 77 complaints, several of which were carried over from 2021 & 2022. There is a notable increase in the complexity of complaints and the number of respondents (pharmacists and/or pharmacies) involved per complaint.

### Decisions of the PPC

The following is a summary of the PPC's decisions in relation to the 77 complaints considered:



### Further Action

The PPC sent 29 complaints forward for further action in 2023. Of these:

- One complaint was referred to Mediation.
- Twenty-five complaints were referred to the Professional Conduct Committee for Inquiry.
- Three complaints were referred to the Health Committee for Inquiry.

### No Further Action

The PPC advised the Council that 36 complaints did not warrant further action. The Council subsequently agreed with the advice of the PPC in relation to all 36 of these complaints.

### Timeframe

Of the 77 complaints considered by the PPC in 2023, 74% were dealt with within six months from the date of receipt by PSI. The remaining complaints were generally delayed due to the complexity of the complaint.

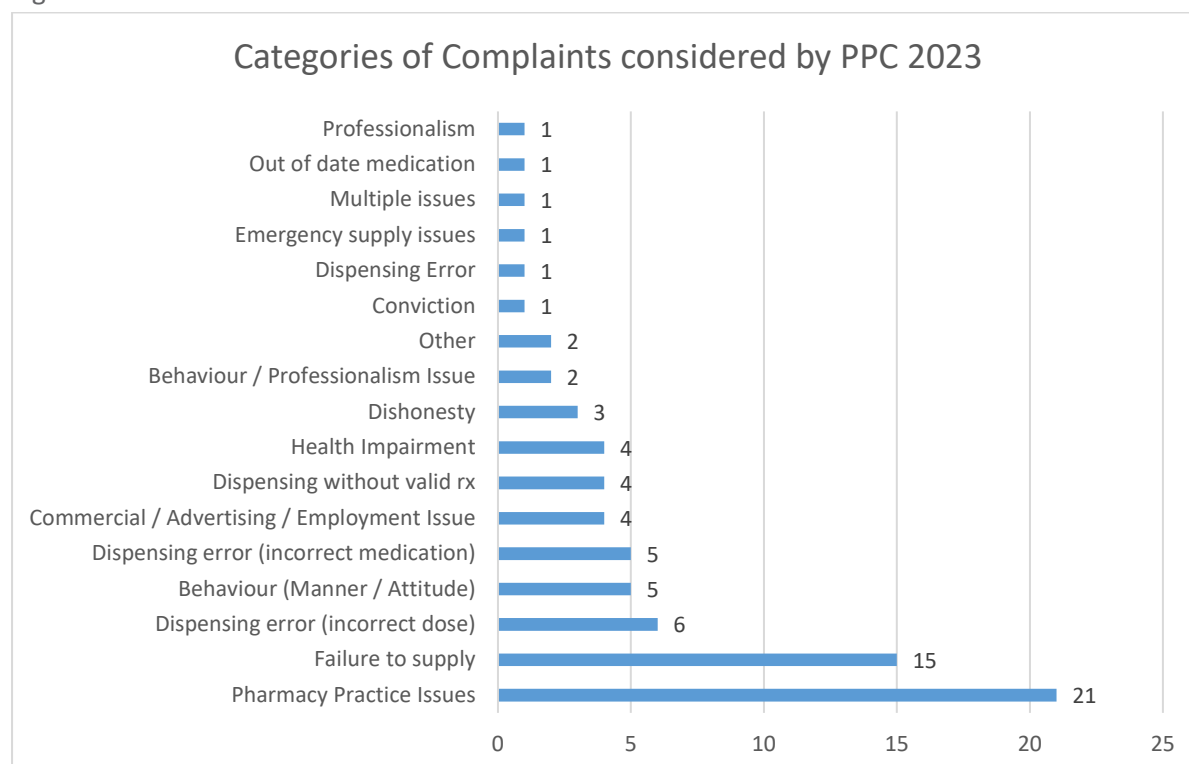
### Withdrawal of Complaint

Five complaints considered by the PPC were withdrawn by complainants during the process. Pursuant to Section 44 of the Act, the PPC decided, with Council's agreement, to take no further action in relation to 4 of these complaints.

### Categories of Complaints Considered by the PPC in 2023

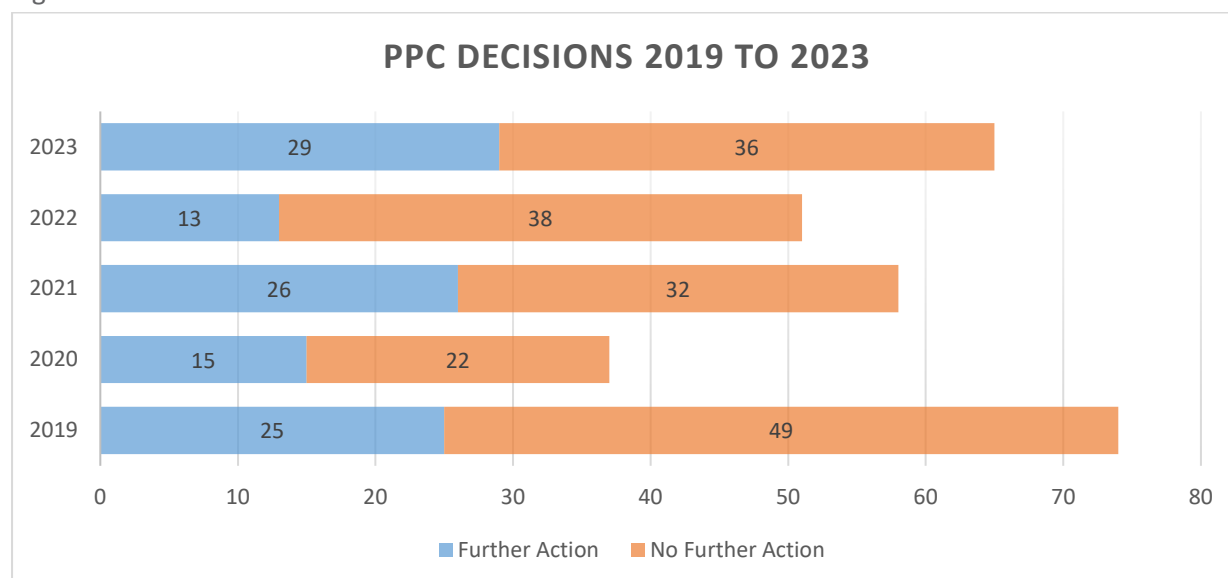
The chart at Figure 1 below shows the categories of complaints considered by the PPC in 2023

Figure 1.



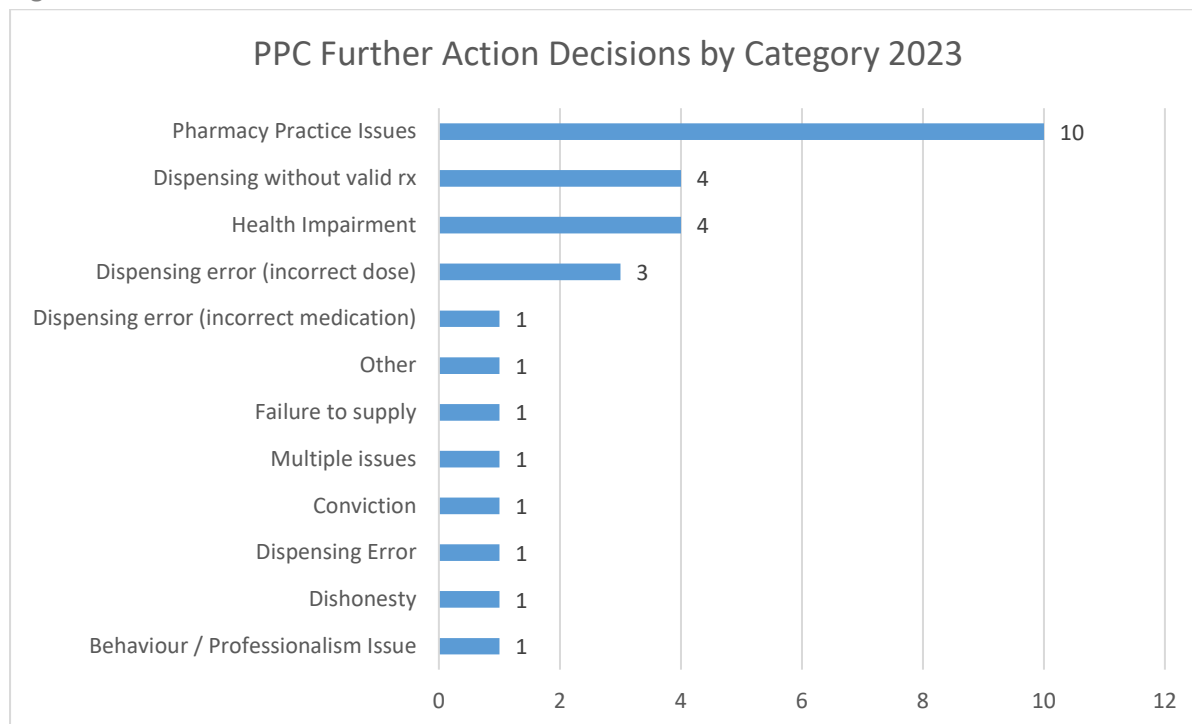
The chart at Figure 2 below shows the number of complaints considered by the PPC over the last five years and the number of these complaints where there was sufficient cause for further action to be taken:

Figure 2.



The chart at Figure 3. below illustrates the category and volume of complaints considered by PPC in 2023 with sufficient cause for further action.

Figure 3.



### Observations

During the PPC's work in 2023, the PPC noted several issues being raised as part of the complaints made to the PSI. The PPC would like to highlight the following:

#### Pharmacy practice issues

Complaints under the Pharmacy Practice Issue category accounted for 27% of the complaints considered by the PPC in 2023 and 31% of the complaints considered in 2022, making it the largest category in both years.

Complaints under the Pharmacy Practice Issue category accounted for 34% of the complaints referred for further action by the PSI in 2023.

#### Dispensing Errors

Complaints under the Dispensing Error category (Incorrect dose or incorrect mediation) accounted for 27% of the complaints referred for further action by the PSI in 2023.

#### Behaviour (Manner/Attitude)

The PPC noted several complaints related to how patients felt they were treated and spoken to by the pharmacist, where a breakdown in communication appears to have occurred between the complainant and the pharmacist. As stated in previous reports, when an issue arises, meaningful, respectful, and clear communication between a pharmacist and a patient can often help resolve the issue before it escalates to a formal complaint to the PSI. The private patient consultation area should be used to discuss sensitive or personal matters with patients.



### Fertility Treatment

During fertility treatment, pharmacist counselling and communication with patients is vitally important at all stages. Pharmacists should endeavour to anticipate the needs of these patients, whose treatment is often time-sensitive. Some IVF medicines are high-tech medicines, and planning and notice by both patients and pharmacists to order and obtain the medicines on time is very important.

### Social Media

The PPC noted that several complaints also relate to the use of social media by the profession. The PPC believes that when expressing personal views in a public context, particularly on important or socially sensitive subjects, pharmacists should do so in a manner consistent with the [Guidance for Pharmacists on the use of Digital and Social Media](#) and the [Code of Conduct](#) for Pharmacists.

### Conclusion

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This Annual Report covers the 14th full year in the PPC's operation, and hybrid meetings are now the norm, with PPC members joining in person or remotely as circumstances require.

It is hoped that the Council, and indeed the public, can continue to have confidence in the way the PPC discharges its functions. The PPC is acutely aware of the importance of its role in the protection of the public and in ensuring that all complaints are dealt with in a timely manner that is transparent and fair for all parties concerned.

## Appendix A - Legislation

### Section 34 of the Pharmacy Act 2007

*“(1) The Council shall establish the following disciplinary committees:*

- (a) a preliminary proceedings committee;*
- (b) a professional conduct committee;*
- (c) a health committee.*

*(2) The President of the Society is not eligible to be appointed to a disciplinary committee.*

*(3) A majority of the members of a disciplinary committee shall be persons other than registered pharmacists and at least one of those persons shall be appointed to represent the interest of the public.*

*(4) At least one third of its members shall be registered pharmacists.*

*(5) At least 2 of its members shall be registered pharmacists who are pharmacy owners.*

*(6) The quorum of a disciplinary committee considering a complaint against a pharmacy owner shall include at least one registered pharmacist who is a pharmacy owner.*

*(7) A person is not eligible to hold concurrent membership of more than one disciplinary committee.*

*(8) The members of a disciplinary committee have, as such, the same protections and immunities as a judge of the High Court.*

*(9) The Council shall appoint a registered medical practitioner with relevant expertise to advise the health committee in relation to each complaint referred to it.*

*(10) The registered medical practitioner must be present at the meetings of that committee but may not vote.*

*(11) The registered medical practitioner has, when advising that committee, the same protections, and immunities as a judge of the High Court.”*

### Section 38 of the Pharmacy Act 2007

*“(1) As soon as practicable after receiving a complaint, the Council shall refer it to the preliminary proceedings committee for its advice on whether there is sufficient cause to warrant further action being taken.*

*(2) The committee may –*

- (a) require the complainant to verify, by affidavit or otherwise, anything contained on the complaint,*
- (b) require the complainant to give, by statutory declaration or otherwise, more information relating to the matter raised by the complaint,*
- (c) require the registered pharmacist or pharmacy owner to give such information in relation to the complaint as the committee specifies,*
- (d) invite the registered pharmacist or pharmacy owner to submit observations.*

*(3) A requirement under subsection (2) –*

- (a) must be in writing,*
- (b) must specify a reasonable time within which it is to be met,*
- (c) may be made along with or after another such requirement.*

*(4) The registered pharmacist or pharmacy owner may give the committee information although not required to do so and submit observations although not invited to do so.*

*(5) Before arriving at its advice on whether there is sufficient cause to warrant further action, the committee shall consider –*

- (a) any information given under this section, and*
- (b) whether the complaint is trivial, vexatious, or made in bad faith.”*

#### Section 39 of the Pharmacy Act 2007

*“(1) On receiving advice pursuant to section 38, the Council shall decide whether to take further action.  
(2) If the Council decides to take no further action, it shall inform the registered pharmacist or the pharmacy owner, the preliminary proceedings committee and the complainant accordingly.”*

#### Section 40 of the Pharmacy Act 2007

*“(1) If the preliminary proceedings committee advises, pursuant to section 38, that there is sufficient cause to warrant further action or the Council decides, under section 39, to take further action, the committee shall either –*

*(a) refer the complaint for resolution by mediation under section 37, or*

*(b) refer the complaint to whichever of the following committees (“committees of inquiry”) it considers appropriate –*

*(i) the professional conduct committee,*

*(ii) the health committee.*

*(2) If informed by a mediator that a complaint referred for resolution by mediation-*

*(a) cannot be so resolved,*

*(b) can be so resolved but only after taking into account considerations which make the complaint more suitable for a committee of inquiry,*

*the committee shall refer the complaint to a committee of inquiry as if under subsection (1)(b).”*

#### Section 44 of the Pharmacy Act 2007

*“If a complaint is withdrawn, the committee considering it may, with the Council’s agreement—*

*(a) decide that no further action is to be taken, or*

*(b) proceed as if the complaint had not been withdrawn.”*