

In the fast-growing private healthcare sector, patients often hear reassurances that their consultants "work within their competence." But what does this phrase really mean? Especially when private clinics increasingly use **video consultations** and offer **remote prescribing**, the fine print around *specialty boundaries* and regulatory oversight demands clear explanation. This post explores the gap between legality and real-world access, the pressures created by NHS funding constraints, and how regulation in England – particularly through the Care Quality Commission (CQC) – governs these issues.



What does “working within competence” mean?

The medical professional code set out by the General Medical Council (GMC) requires all doctors to provide care and treatment within the limits of their training, skills, and experience. This means specialists should only treat conditions falling clearly within their area of expertise, often defined by their **GMC Specialist Register** entry. For instance, a psychiatrist with specialisation in mental health should not prescribe or treat complex pain syndromes beyond their competence.

Competence is not a vague term; it aligns with the scope of practice for which a doctor is formally trained and assessed. Straying outside these boundaries risks patient safety, clinical errors, and regulatory sanction.

Specialty Boundaries: Practical Examples

- **Pain management vs Psychiatry:** While these fields sometimes overlap, chronic pain treatment frequently involves multi-disciplinary approaches and interventions best handled by physicians or anaesthetists with pain medicine qualifications—not purely psychiatrists.
- **Clinic Staffing:** Clinics must ensure the consultants involved have appropriate specialist qualifications matching the treatments offered, especially when interventions are complex or require prescription medication.

The NHS funding gap and private healthcare's growing role

The reality is that NHS resources are increasingly stretched, leaving patients to seek private care to access timely specialist treatment. This funding gap often means patients turn to private clinics for conditions such as persistent pain or mental health concerns, areas sometimes underserved within the NHS.

This influx causes private providers to adopt newer service models—like video consultations and remote prescribing—to meet demand. While this can improve access, it also raises questions about maintaining strict compliance with specialty boundaries.

Legality vs Real-World Access

- **Legality:** It is perfectly legal for consultants to consult, diagnose, and prescribe remotely in England, provided these activities are declared appropriately to the CQC and the consultant works within their GMC-registered specialty competence.
- **Availability:** Access to specialists in certain niche fields remains limited, pushing some clinicians to stretch their practice scope or for clinics to advertise services without clear clarity about who is providing care.

Patients should always ask whether the consultant treating them is registered for the condition or treatment offered, particularly when clinics use broad terms like "specialist pain service" or "psychiatry-led mental wellness".

Video consultations and remote prescribing: regulation and transparency

Video consultations have become a standard tool for private healthcare, especially since the pandemic. They enhance accessibility but also demand rigorous governance to ensure clinical safety and legality.

Remote prescribing, where a consultant issues prescriptions without face-to-face assessment, remains strictly regulated in England. Clinics providing this service must notify the Care Quality Commission in their registration, reflecting the importance of transparency and accountability.

What exactly must clinics disclose?

- That they offer remote consultations and prescribing services.
- Which specialties are involved in remote prescribing (e.g., pain medicine, psychiatry).
- Evidence the consultant holds the relevant specialist registration examining their competence for issuing these prescriptions.

Failing to comply risks regulatory action, including fines or service closure.

Why are prices and consultation details critical?

One common and problematic pitfall is **not stating consultation or prescription prices upfront**. Patients deserve transparent fees covering:

- Initial consultation cost (face-to-face or video).
- Follow-up and ongoing review charges.
- Prescription fees—many clinics misleadingly omit these, which can inflate your eventual cost significantly.

As a journalist, one frequently encounters clinics with excellent marketing copy about specialist services but vague on key practical details like <https://todaynews.co.uk/2026/08/10/inside-the-uks-private-medical-cannabis-clinics-how-the-sector-actually-works/> pricing for consultations or medications prescribed. This blurs the line between healthcare and wellness marketing, which is a red flag.

Who can prescribe, and why does the GMC Specialist Register matter?

Only a doctor listed on the GMC Specialist Register for a particular field should prescribe within that specialty. The Register ensures a standardised benchmark of education, training, skills, and experience.

This is crucial to:

1. Guarantee treatment safety.
2. Protect patients from unqualified prescribing risks (e.g., incorrect medication for complex conditions).
3. Maintain public trust in medical professionalism.

For example, a psychiatrist managing bipolar disorder should not prescribe opioid-based painkillers outside the remit of their competence; that is better left to specialist pain physicians.

Role of the CQC in England: Oversight and enforcement

The Care Quality Commission regulates all private healthcare providers, including those offering remote consultations and prescribing. CQC's role covers:

- Ensuring clinics declare services like remote prescribing promptly.
- Inspecting staffing structures to verify qualifications align with services offered.
- Monitoring advertisement claims for accuracy regarding consultant qualifications and treatments provided.
- Investigating complaints from patients around poor care, misleading info, or unqualified practice.

Patients can check a clinic's CQC rating and inspection reports online before booking appointments.



Checklist: How to safeguard your private healthcare experience

- **Verify the consultant's specialty registration** on the GMC Specialist Register.
- Ask specifically if the consultation will be remote, and if so, confirm costs and follow-up plans.
- Request clear pricing for both consultation and prescriptions—insist these are in writing.
- Confirm that the clinic's CQC registration covers the services you require, including remote prescribing.
- Be cautious of clinics blending “wellness” marketing with medical claims without clear governance.

Conclusion

“Specialists must work within their competence” is more than a legal phrase—it underpins patient safety and professional integrity in the private healthcare sector. While video consultations and remote prescribing offer exciting access benefits, they must be delivered by appropriately qualified consultants who maintain specialty boundaries.

Patients navigating private care should demand transparency about specialist qualifications, clinic staffing, pricing, and regulatory registrations, especially with the growing complexity in areas like pain management and psychiatry. Understanding the difference between legality and actual service availability can protect your health and your wallet.

Always remember: verified competence and clear information are your best tools for safe, effective private healthcare access.