



# Royal College of Physicians

## **Professor Robin Ferner Biography**

Robin Ferner is Honorary Consultant Physician and Clinical Pharmacologist in Birmingham, and Honorary Professor at the University of Birmingham, where he has helped to teach the safe and rational use of medicines for 25 years. Until he retired on 31st October 2017 he was Director of the West Midlands Centre for Adverse Drug Reactions. His research has focussed on harm from medicines: adverse drug reactions, medication errors, and poisoning. This has brought him into contact with lawyers and the police, and he is the author of *Forensic Pharmacology: murder, mayhem, and malpractice* (OUP). In 2012 he won the British Pharmacological Society's Lilly Prize 'for distinction in Clinical Pharmacology over many years'—a sign of longevity.

## **Presentation Summary**

**Topic:** Drug Errors & the Law

Errors occur when actions are intended but not performed. They are part of the human condition. In medical practice, drug errors (medication errors) are common, because the process of deciding on which drug to prescribe, writing the prescription, dispensing the medicine, administering it, and monitoring its effects is necessarily complex. When errors occur, they may cause harm. The person who is harmed may seek compensation for harm from negligent acts, which include making drug errors. That is a matter for the civil law. It can also be a matter for professional regulatory bodies such as the General Medical Council. More worrying for doctors is the possibility that a fatal error can be so bad that it constitutes a 'crime against the State,' and is treated as a crime—gross negligence manslaughter. Errors are, by definition, unintentional; the 'badness' of an error is difficult to separate from its consequences; and charging healthcare professionals with manslaughter is hardly an incentive to an open and honest culture. It seems best to improve systems and so reduce errors, and if they occur, to learn from them rather than imprison the individual deemed responsible.