



## INFORMATION ABOUT THE PROCESSING OF FORMAL COMPLAINTS AGAINST PSYCHOLOGISTS UNDER THE HEALTH PRACTITIONERS COMPETENCE ASSURANCE (HPCA) ACT 2003

- PART A:** Making a formal complaint against a psychologist.  
**PART B:** Processes for managing complaints against Family Court-appointed psychologists.  
**PART C:** The Board's process for managing complaints against psychologists.

**PLEASE NOTE:** If you have concerns about a psychologist you are welcome to discuss these informally with the Board in the first instance. You can do this by phone or in writing. You might like to complete and submit to the Board our optional "Raising a Concern about a Psychologist" form. You can download the form from our website or phone us and ask for one to be sent to you. It may be possible for some concerns to be resolved without the need for a formal complaint. The following information is about how the Board deals with concerns that have progressed to become formal complaints.

### PART A: MAKING A FORMAL COMPLAINT AGAINST A PSYCHOLOGIST

Information on how to make a formal complaint against a psychologist.

1. The Psychologists Board (the **Board**) can only deal with complaints against practitioners who are (or were at the relevant time) on the Register of Psychologists. It is useful therefore to first check that the psychologist who is the subject of your complaint is, or has previously been, registered with the Board. This can be checked by contacting the Board's Professional Standards Coordinator on (04) 471-4587, or by consulting the Board's online Register (see [www.psychologistsboard.org.nz](http://www.psychologistsboard.org.nz)).
2. All formal complaints must be in writing. They can be submitted by post or by email. The Board's optional form "Raising a Concern about a Psychologist" can be used to submit either a concern or a formal complaint. Please provide as much information as possible, and outline any and all allegations you wish to make. You may find it helpful to refer to the *Code of Ethics for Psychologists Working in Aotearoa/New Zealand [2002]* to help you draft your complaint. The Code is also available on our website.
3. Complaints should be sent to:

New Zealand Psychologists Board  
PO Box 9644  
Marion Square  
Wellington 6141  
E: info@nzpb.org.nz

**and/or**

The Health and Disability  
Commissioner  
PO Box 1791  
Auckland 1140  
E: hdc@hdc.org.nz

**If you require assistance:** The Health and Disability Commissioner (**HDC**) have support systems in place to provide assistance, if required, with lodging a complaint. (Call 0800 11 22 33.)

4. Whenever the Board receives a formal complaint alleging that the practice or conduct of a psychologist has affected a health consumer<sup>1</sup>, the Board must promptly forward it to the HDC. This is a legal requirement under the HPCA Act and the HDC Act. The Board then responds to the complainant<sup>2</sup> acknowledging receipt of the complaint and sends a copy of the complaint to the psychologist. *Please note that the Board cannot take any action under Part 4 of the HPCA Act<sup>3</sup> on a complaint while it is being considered by the HDC.*

<sup>1</sup> "Health Consumer" includes any person on or in respect of whom any health care procedure is carried out.

<sup>2</sup> "Complainant" means any person(s) who submit a complaint against a psychologist.

<sup>3</sup> Part 4 of the HPCA Act relates to complaints and discipline matters.

5. The HDC will consider the complaint under the provisions of the HDC Act. The Commissioner may, after reviewing the complaint, decide that it is more appropriate for the Board to deal with the matter. If that is the case, the Commissioner's office will write to the complainant setting out the reasons for the decision and will refer the complaint to the Board. (This stage can take a month or more.) To check progress by the HDC's office, call their free-phone number (0800 11 22 33).

## **PART B: PROCESSES FOR MANAGING COMPLAINTS AGAINST FAMILY COURT-APPOINTED PSYCHOLOGISTS**

*This section references the Family Court Practice Note<sup>4</sup> and applies to complaints made where Family Court proceedings are pending, in progress, or have been concluded.*

1. The Family Court will normally deal with most complaints involving psychologists as part of its jurisdiction to regulate its own process. The Board will typically deal with matters that go beyond the process of the Court and that raise questions about professional competence, conduct, or ethics. This may include matters such as inappropriate relationships between the report writer and the parties, breaches of privacy, and incompetence. The Court will formally refer all such cases to the Board. Furthermore, the HDC will normally deal with complaints about the examination of the child, who in this context is defined as a health consumer. (Parents and other parties are not deemed by the HDC to be health consumers in this context.)
2. Many complaints to the Family Court will be those that raise questions about the quality of the evidence before the Court. Matters that will generally be dealt with by the Court may include:
  - allegations of perceived bias;
  - that the report writer has a sexist, racist, or otherwise discriminatory approach;
  - the methodology used by the psychologist;
  - that one parent was treated differently from the other parent without sufficient reason given; and/or
  - any matter relating to the content of the report, such as failure to deal with any fact or issue, or the length or style of the report.
3. Complaints made to the Court about the examination of the child may be directed to the HDC, or an Advocate under the HDC Act. The child may choose to lay such a complaint with any appropriate party, including the Court.
4. Complaints to be dealt with by the Court where proceedings are pending or in progress should be referred to the presiding Judge. Complaints after proceedings have concluded should be referred to the Regional Administrative Family Court Judge.
5. Where a complaint to the Family Court relates to proceedings that are pending or in progress, the presiding Judge will deal with the complaint, where possible, either before the hearing or in the course of the hearing (for example, through cross-examination, submission, or evidence called on behalf of the complainant). **Note:** *The Board will normally defer its consideration of the complaint pending receipt of the Judge's comment once the case has been concluded. This can result in significant delays.*
6. Where a complaint to the Court relates to proceedings that have concluded, the Regional Administrative Family Court Judge will consider the complaint and produce a minute<sup>5</sup> containing the view of the Court regarding the complaint. The complaint and minute need not be formally referred to the Board unless it appears to the Judge that there are issues of competence, or other issues best dealt with by the Board.
7. The Family Court will normally consider all complaints in the first instance. Any complaint referred by the Board to the Court shall be directed to the Registrar of the Court where the report was requested. The Registrar will refer the complaint to the presiding Judge, or Regional

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<sup>4</sup> The Family Court Practice Note is a Family Court guideline document implemented originally in June 2006 (and subsequently revised).

<sup>5</sup> "Minute" means a brief summary recording matters reviewed.

Administrative Family Court Judge, to consider. Where the Board has referred a complaint to the Court, the Judge considering it shall provide a written minute to the Board as soon as practicable (but normally only after the case has been concluded), detailing any opinion on the merits of the complaint, and any action that will be taken by the Court. The Court will advise whether:

- The complaint relates to a matter within the Court process, and will initially be dealt with by the Court; and/or
- The complaint appears to be of sufficient seriousness to require formal referral to the Board.

8. **Note:** The Board must deal with complaints according to its own procedure and the requirements of the HPCA Act, and is not bound by any decision made about a complaint by the Family Court.

9. Where a complaint is dealt with by the Board and relates to a report under s 133 of the Care of Children Act, or s 178 of the Children Young Persons and their Families Act, the Board may make a written request for a copy of the report. The Court will normally release a (complete or redacted) copy of the report to the Board for the sole purpose of dealing with the complaint. If the Board appoints a Professional Conduct Committee to assess the complaint, the Committee will also follow this procedure to request access to the report.

### **PART C: THE BOARD'S PROCESS FOR MANAGING COMPLAINTS AGAINST PSYCHOLOGISTS**

*How complaints are typically processed by the Board (following consideration by the HDC and/or the Family Court).*

When a complaint is formally referred back to the Board by the HDC or the Family Court, or when it is returned as a "no action taken" by those organisations, it will be considered by our Parts 3 and 4 Committee<sup>6</sup> (the **Committee**). The Committee will take the opinions of the Court and the HDC into account, but are not bound by them. The Professional Standards Coordinator (the **Coordinator**) will inform the complainant and psychologist of the next steps to be taken. These steps will normally involve inviting a response to the complaint from the psychologist, providing the complainant with an opportunity to comment on the psychologist's response, and then asking the psychologist for any final comment. It is standard practice to allow two working weeks for a response, but reasonable requests for extensions may also be granted. Once all relevant information has been received the Committee will assess the nature and circumstances of the complaint. The Committee will then make one of the following decisions:

- to refer the complaint to a Professional Conduct Committee (**PCC**) for a full investigation; or
- to submit the complaint to the competence or fitness review procedures as outlined in Part 3 of the Act; or
- to issue an "advisory letter" to the psychologist; or
- to refer the complaint to another agency (e.g., Privacy Commissioner, Police); or
- to take no further action.

Reasons for taking no further action on a complaint may include:

- a) other options are considered more appropriate;
- b) the Committee considers there is insufficient information to assess the complaint;
- c) the allegations cannot be independently verified, and/or
- d) the complaint does not fall within the Board's jurisdiction.

The Committee will normally give reasons for its decision.

#### **Professional Conduct Committees (PCC)**

1. If the P3&4 Committee decides to refer a complaint to a PCC, the Coordinator will inform both parties<sup>7</sup> that a PCC will be appointed. The PCC must consist of 2 psychologists and 1 layperson.<sup>8</sup> (Please note that it can take several weeks for a PCC to be established.) Once the

<sup>6</sup> The committee delegated by the Board to deal with complaints, competence, and fitness issues and named after the relevant parts of the HPCA Act.

<sup>7</sup> "Party/Parties" means parties to the complaint (i.e., the psychologist and complainant).

<sup>8</sup> "Layperson" means a person who is neither registered nor qualified to be registered as a health practitioner.

PCC's members are appointed, the Coordinator will write to both parties providing a brief description of each PCC member so that they may know a little more about them.

2. The psychologist and/or the complainant may request changes in membership of the PCC. Either party may (within 5 working days) give notice in writing requesting that any or all of the PCC members not be appointed and state their reasons for the request. The Board must have regard to the request but does not have to comply with it. If no request for a change is received, membership of the PCC is confirmed. The Coordinator will write to both parties confirming PCC membership and will provide the PCC members with all the information in relation to the complaint.
3. On confirmation of the PCC's membership, the PCC will officially commence its investigation. The PCC is a Board committee which operates at arm's length from the Board and may adopt and follow its own procedures but must ensure that the psychologist, the Board, and the complainant are kept informed about the progress of their investigation. The principles of natural justice apply. A PCC investigation can take anywhere from one month to more than a year to complete, depending on the complexity of the matter and any obstacles that may arise.
4. The PCC may (and usually do) appoint a legal advisor to advise them on matters of law, procedure, or evidence. They may also appoint an investigator to collect information required by them and to investigate complaints.
5. The PCC may receive as evidence any statement, document, information, or matter that, in its opinion, may assist it to deal effectively with the subject of its investigation, whether or not that information or matter would be admissible in a court of law. The PCC may hear oral evidence and receive statements and submissions from any or all of the following: the psychologist, any employer of the psychologist, any person in association with whom the psychologist practices, the complainant, and any clinical expert.
6. The PCC must give the psychologist and complainant reasonable opportunity to present evidence on each matter referred to them. Both parties should keep in mind that the efficiency of the PCC's progress is dependent at times on how quickly requests for information are met. (As a guide, a response should be provided to the PCC within 10 working days of the request.)
7. The complainant may be supported by a person nominated by them, and that person, with the leave of the PCC, may be heard by the PCC on the complainant's behalf.
8. The PCC may write to any person requiring them to produce any papers, documents, records, or things. This excludes any information or document that would be privileged in a court of law or would breach the Official Information Act or Privacy Act. A person who receives this notice must, without charge, comply with the requirement stated in the notice and within the period specified in the notice (i.e., not less than 10 working days after the notice is given to the person).
9. No civil or disciplinary proceedings lie against any person in respect of any evidence given, or statements or submissions made, unless that person has acted in bad faith.
10. If at any time in the course of investigating the complaint the PCC believes that the psychologist's practice poses a risk of serious harm to the public, it may recommend to the Board that the psychologist's Practising Certificate be suspended.
11. At the conclusion of the complaint investigation, the PCC must (by written notice or 'final report' to the Board, the psychologist, and the complainant), make one determination and/or one or more recommendation(s) as set out below. The P3&4 Committee must promptly consider any recommendation(s) made by the PCC and must accept any determinations. Both parties will be informed if any further procedures are required following consideration of any recommendation(s).

**Determinations that a PCC may make:**

1. That no further steps be taken.
2. That a charge be laid before the Health Practitioners Disciplinary Tribunal.<sup>9</sup>
3. That the complaint be submitted to conciliation.

**Recommendations that a PCC may make:**

1. That the Board review the psychologist's competence to practise.
2. That the Board review the psychologist's fitness to practise.
3. That the Board review the psychologist's scope of practice.
4. That the subject matter of investigation be referred to the police.
5. That the Board counsel the psychologist.

12. If the PCC determines that 'no further steps' should be taken, then no recommendations can be made.
13. If the PCC has decided to submit a complaint to conciliation, it must appoint an independent person (the **Conciliator**) to assist the psychologist and complainant concerned to resolve the complaint by agreement. The Conciliator will report the outcome to the PCC who will decide whether the complaint has been successfully resolved or not. If not, the PCC must promptly decide whether it should lay a charge against the psychologist before the Health Practitioners Disciplinary Tribunal, make one or more of the available recommendations, or decide that no further steps be taken.
14. If the PCC decides to lay a charge before the HPDT, it must appoint a prosecutor and formulate an appropriate charge and lay it before the Tribunal (together with any Conciliator's report) and give a copy of the charge and the PCC's report to the psychologist.
15. If the PCC makes a determination that no further steps be taken, the PCC must give the psychologist, the Board, and the complainant written notice of the determination and the PCC's reasons.

The Professional Standards Coordinator can be contacted regarding further information about complaints against psychologists and for progress updates on current complaints being handled by the Board.

**Please take note** that the time frames for a complaint process can vary greatly and will depend on the type and circumstances of the complaint (as has been outlined throughout this document). The Board endeavours at all times to keep parties fully informed at each stage but we welcome your enquiry at any time during the process.

New Zealand Psychologists Board  
Telephone: 0800 471 4580, Email: [complaints@nzpb.org.nz](mailto:complaints@nzpb.org.nz)  
**New Zealand Psychologist Board, PO Box 9644, Marion Square, Wellington 6141**

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<sup>9</sup> <http://www.hpdt.org.nz>