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Continuing Competence Programme for Psychologists Practising in Aotearoa New Zealand

THIS ISSUE FEBRUARY 2009

Introducing the Continuing Competence Programme

Consistent with the objective of the Health Practitioners Competence Assurance Act 2003 ("**the Act**") to "protect the health and safety of members of the public by providing for mechanisms to ensure that health professionals are competent and fit to practise their profession", the Psychologists Board ("**the Board**") is obliged to be satisfied that a practitioner is competent to practise in New Zealand before that person is registered, and, in accordance with sections 26 and 27, that he or she has maintained the required standard of competence before they are issued an Annual Practising Certificate (**APC**).

As foreshadowed in our 2007 consultation document, the Board is introducing a Continuing Competence Programme (**CCP**) as part of its endeavours to meet its obligations under the Act. The dual objectives of the CCP are to provide a framework to assist individual practitioners to address the ongoing challenge of maintaining competence, while also giving the Board a mechanism to support and ensure practitioners maintain competence. **All actively practising psychologists will be required to participate in the CCP from 1 April 2009, and will be requested to declare they have done so when renewing their APC in early 2010.**

The development of the Board's CCP has been informed by the College of Alberta Psychologists' emerging continuing competence programme¹, consultation with psychologists and other stakeholders² (August 2007), and a three month trial of the planned CCP³ (completed December 2008).

1. What is competence?

The Board has published Core Competencies (which include minimum standards of cultural competency) for the "Psychologist" scope, and additional competencies for two vocational scopes – "Clinical Psychologist" and "Educational Psychologist"⁴. Core Competencies are the minimum competencies that each practitioner should possess at the time of registration. The initial acquisition of these competencies is the responsibility of the training programme and the practitioner seeking registration.

Competence is variously defined, and in this context it involves the complex interaction of four major components: knowledge, skills, judgment, and diligence.

Knowledge involves having absorbed and understood a body of information sufficiently well to then understand and conceptualise the range of professional issues that one can reasonably expect to encounter. Knowledge is a necessary, but not sufficient foundation for competence.

Skill is the ability to effectively apply knowledge in actual practice.

Judgement involves knowing when to apply which skills, and under what circumstances. It includes self-reflection on and awareness of one's own values, experiences, attitudes, and social context, and how these may influence actions and perceived meaning. Good judgement increases the likelihood that choices made will

¹ The Board acknowledges with appreciation the generosity of the College of Alberta Psychologists in making available documentation regarding the development of their continuing competence programme.

² See report on the Board's website.

³ Also reported on the Board's website.

⁴ Core competencies for the Practice of Psychologists (2006), New Zealand Psychologists Board.

be beneficial for the individuals, families, groups, communities or organisations with which psychologists work.

Diligence requires the consistent application of knowledge, skills, and judgement in one's professional activities and taking care to give priority to the clients' needs. Diligence also encompasses striving to give the best service possible to each and every client.

These components are all required to achieve the level of performance expected of a psychologist, and they will vary depending on the level of seniority and the context of practice. Epstein and Hundert (2002)⁵ defined professional competence as "the habitual and judicious use of communication, knowledge, technical skills, clinical reasoning, emotions, values, and reflection in daily practice for the benefit of the individual and community being served."

Whereas "competencies" refers to the component skills or knowledge which contribute to the whole, a competent psychologist is one who has attained a state of overall or integrated professional abilities. The Board's programme recognises that it is this state that each individual strives for and is continually refining, as part of continuing competence.

2. What is Continuing Competence?

A Continuing Competence Programme involves engagement in self-reflection, the application of learning to practice, and subsequent evaluation. It is an active and dynamic process of continual learning which generates ongoing professional growth. It therefore involves much more than just accruing credits in an education programme.

Self-reflection encompasses a number of levels of activity. At its core is the notion of awareness of one's own knowledge, assumptions and past experiences. It involves the ability to look at the self, and the self in relation to others and to the world at large. Self-reflection embraces the ability to 'stand back from the self' and examine critically one's own thinking patterns. Critical reflection also requires an internal honesty and integrity as we examine our own thoughts and assumptions. This reflection is the central dynamic in intentional learning, problem solving, and validity testing.

While the HPCA Act places a statutory obligation on the Board to ensure practitioners are competent before issuing an APC, the Code of Ethics places responsibility for keeping abreast with current developments on the individual psychologist. Therefore there is an alignment between the obligation on practitioners to be continually engaged in self-reflection and competence maintenance and the statutory obligations on the Board.

The Board's model invites individual psychologists to make a mental shift from "having to comply with an expected level of education" or simply collecting enough points to one of actively facilitating their own professional growth. This process is expected to maintain the vitality and safe practice of individuals and to promote the high professional standing of psychology as a profession.

⁵ Epstein, R.M. and Hundert, E.M. (2002) Defining and assessing professional competence. *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 287(2), 226-235

3. Overview

The CCP requires each psychologist to engage annually in a self-reflective review (with the assistance of their supervisor or mentor) of their practice to identify their own continuing competence needs and to ascertain how these goals can best be met.

The resulting self-directed learning plan will inform the direction of continuing competence activities for the coming year, although it is recognised that some learning needs may be overtaken by more urgent learning priorities that arise or, alternately, that some learning goals may be delayed by the lack of a suitable learning opportunity. It is also acknowledged that unforeseen learning opportunities may provide fresh stimulus and direction throughout the year which can add to the ongoing enrichment and vitality of professional life. The range of activities that may contribute to continuing competence is broad and will change to reflect the stages of one's career. For example, this breadth may encompass (but is not limited to) continuing education, upgrading practice to match new developments, or personal therapy.

Continuing competence activities undertaken are to be recorded as evidence of the psychologist's ongoing programme of competence maintenance and advancement. Although optimally this activity will relate directly to the learning goals identified, any activity that contributes to a psychologist's knowledge and skills, or their ability to judge complex professional contexts within areas of practice and professional activity would be deemed acceptable. It is acknowledged that there will be a balance between opportunistic and directed learning for most psychologists. However, if a psychologist's annual review were to identify significant deficits in skills or knowledge which threaten the safety of the public, then it would be expected that the remediation of these deficits would be acted on with urgency.

The cycle is completed and revitalised annually by a review which allows an assessment of progress towards identified goals and reflection on evolving directions, and which generates the next round of learning goals.

4 Underlying principles

The programme has been shaped by the following principles.

- Ψ *Accountability:* As a health professional, a practitioner bears the ultimate responsibility both for maintaining and for demonstrating professional competence to practise (as guided by a range of professional standards, codes of ethics and codes of conduct).
- Ψ *Lifelong continuous learning and improvement* is essential to the professional psychologist. Self-reflection, self-assessment and evaluation are intrinsic to the psychologist's role, both for quality assurance and for professional self-care. There is also a need to keep abreast of evolving fields of knowledge as the psychology discipline moves forward.
- Ψ *Psychologists at different stages of their career have quite different professional development needs.* Maintaining competence is a process which continues over the entire course of a career, adapting to changes in practice environments, professional domains and consumer needs.
- Ψ *Flexibility in maintaining competence:* There is no one best way to maintain competence. The range of activities selected will vary according to individual

learning style, identified needs, timing, availability, and context. Other life experiences may also contribute to professional competence.

- Ψ *Easy to follow, understand and economical:* It is envisaged that the CCP can be readily integrated with regular workplace requirements and professional tasks and roles, rather than being extra/extraordinary. The self-reflective review should be tailored to individual needs to make it a useful and personally meaningful exercise. Recording of continuing competence activities should be clear but brief.

5. Who is required to complete the CCP?

Every psychologist who applies for an APC is required to declare that they are fit and competent to practise. From early 2010, every psychologist applying to renew their APC will be required to declare they have undertaken a self-reflective review and engaged in continual competence development over the previous year. **To meet this deadline, your participation in the CCP should start from 1 April 2009**, beginning with the self-reflective review and setting of learning goals for the 2009 - 2010 APC year.

6. Audit

General and Targeted Audits

Starting from April 2010, a percentage of APC applications will be audited each year - either randomly selected (general audit) or from specifically targeted groups of practitioners (targeted audit). Targeted groups may (for example only) involve psychologists registered in vocational scopes, overseas trained psychologists, or psychologists who have undergone a competence review or programme.

The audit process and what it involves

1. If a psychologist is selected for an audit, the Board will require that practitioner to submit his or her CCP records within 20 working days of receiving the request.
2. One extension of up to five working days to submit the required information may be requested, but need not be granted.
3. The Board will determine the outcome of the audit and notify the psychologist in writing within 15 working days. If the Board has any concerns regarding the documentation and evidence of CCP activity, they may request additional information. In the event that there are serious concerns following an audit, a Competence Review may be ordered.
4. Failure to provide all the required information may result in suspension of the psychologist's APC until they submit documentation that satisfactorily supports the application.

Exemptions

A psychologist may apply in writing to the Board within 10 working days of receiving an audit request to be exempted from an audit if that person has recently been out of practice for more than 6 months. Reasons might involve long-term incapacitating illness (or illness in a family member, spouse or partner), study leave, parental leave, and overseas travel. Any documentation granting an exemption should be retained for future audits. If an exemption is not granted an appeal process is available.

Appeal Process

An appeal may be lodged with the Board if:

1. You have had your APC suspended or revoked;
2. You believe you have reasonable/compelling grounds for an exemption; or
3. You believe that you have not been given due process.

What is expected in the audit

The Board's aim is that all active psychologists engage in a meaningful process of self-reflective review and ongoing self-directed learning programme. The audit will check for evidence of engagement in the process. The Board has avoided prescribing a specific amount of professional development in favour of supporting individuals to self-monitor and self-regulate.

Auditing Professional Bodies

At this stage, the Board does not accredit or approve continued competence programmes offered by other organisations. This means that no organisation or body should hold out a professional development course, workshop or conference "as accredited by the Board". Each psychologist holding an APC must fully comply with the requirements of the Board's CCP and the completion of requirements of other organisations does not grant an exemption. While professional development undertaken to meet the requirements of other programmes may be recorded as part of the CCP record, the completion of such requirements may not satisfy all of the requirements of the Board's CCP. It may be, however, that some psychologists find the additional structure of such programmes a good addition to the more self-directed programme required by the Board.

The Board does not accredit or audit providers of continuing competence events (e.g., workshops, conferences, seminars). Practitioners are advised to choose professional development activities with care to maximise benefits. Feedback from CCP Trial participants highlighted the difficulty in accessing courses at the appropriate level of skills. Awareness of learning goals and clarity of the competencies associated with a particular domain of practice may assist individuals to determine whether a course is appropriate for them.

7. Your guidelines to CCP participation

The Board's CCP is a high-trust model that emphasizes personal responsibility, flexibility and choice. Participation in the programme requires you to self-reflect, review, set learning goals and then select, provide evidence of, and evaluate a range of professional development activities undertaken to develop, enhance and maintain your competence. The process will assist you to identify gaps or weaknesses in your knowledge, skills, and attitudes and to formulate your current and long term learning needs to facilitate your ongoing learning.

At a minimum it is expected that your self-reflective review will assess your current competence against professional standards as outlined in the Board's Core Competencies for the Practice of Psychology in Aotearoa New Zealand and the Code of Ethics. Your review should also be informed by the standards required to practise competently in the domains of your current professional activity. Some CCP Trial participants noted the risk of blind spots or "not knowing what you do not know" – discussion with professional colleagues may enhance your awareness of up-to-date or

emerging competencies in a particular area of practice. In the years ahead the Board will be publishing a series of "Best Practice Guidelines" that should also prove helpful.

Your self-reflective review and learning plan may be developed independently, but must be reviewed in consultation with a supervisor, mentor, or senior colleague. The consultation feedback on the proposed programme was strongly of the opinion that review with a supervisor (or respected senior colleague) offered benefits, including greater safeguards against lack of insight into one's own practice.

The following steps are involved:

1. Conduct a competency self-assessment. Review all aspects of your professional practice against the required competencies with the assistance of your supervisor or a respected senior colleague.
2. Develop objectives for continuing competence based on this self-evaluation.
3. Set a learning plan to achieve those objectives.
4. Record continuing competence activities that you undertake throughout the year towards achieving these objectives, as well as any other objectives that arise as the year progresses. Include supervision records.
5. Engage in critical reflection on the outcomes of your professional development programme, and re-assess your learning objectives.
6. Having participated throughout the 2009-10 APC year, you can declare on applying for a new APC (approx. March 2010) that you have undertaken continuing competence activities and that you have maintained competence.
7. Retain the records of your CCP for any future audit. Note that a portion of APC applicants will be audited each year which will include seeking verification of the self-reflective review from your supervisor.

Fuller notes on the process are detailed below:

Step 1: Self reflective review

The review should begin with a summary of the domains of your professional practice. The review should include consideration of the particular competencies, challenges and ethical issues associated with each domain of practice.

Where relevant the review should note any emerging domains of activity and the evolving knowledge in a particular field.

You are expected to review and evaluate your performance and identify needs in relation to knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviour based on the Core Competencies and against the standards represented in the Code of Ethics.

The purpose of the review is to develop a comprehensive overview of your practice by identifying areas of competence, strengths and aspects requiring further development. You should give any new areas of practice extra scrutiny.

You should integrate the review with workplace contextual features where relevant.

It may be helpful to use the Core Competencies and the Code of Ethics documents⁶ (or any other relevant professional standards guides) to prompt and structure discussion. You should structure and focus your review on aspects that are the most meaningful to you.

A record of your review should be retained for future reference and for audit purposes.

Step 2: Setting objectives for Continuing Competence development

Based on the outcomes of your assessment, identify and record one or more objectives for development. You may wish to give some objectives a priority rating. It may also be appropriate to group them according to whether they are a short or long term goal.

Optimally, your objectives should be **SMART**.

- Specific
- Measurable
- Attainable
- Relevant and realistic
- Time limited

You may, however, have goals which are less specific and which are stated in higher level or abstract terms. It is essential that your goals are meaningful to you.

Record your goals for future reference and also for audit purposes.

Step 3: Determine a learning plan

Once your learning goals are formulated, you should develop a plan which will enable you to meet them. A range of learning activities will be recognised as contributing to a CCP for audit purposes. These activities may include (but are not limited to) such activities as researching a topic, consulting a colleague, engaging in a supervision plan, reading professional literature, enrolling in a continuing education option, attending workshops or conferences, and/or undertaking further training or personal development.

Formulate a plan considering your desired outcome and the availability of resources, along with the variety of ways that your objective may be achieved. You may wish to add to the plan throughout the year as new learning objectives emerge (e.g. a client presenting with a particular problem), and/or as opportunities for further learning arise. Your plan may be continually evolving. It is acknowledged that changes in your circumstances may result in alterations to your plan. Reasonable flexibility will be allowed for in the audit process.

Document your plan.

Step 4: Record activities undertaken towards the learning plan

Record any learning activities and, where appropriate, retain documentary evidence of completion. Indicate clearly whether an activity undertaken has addressed a goal identified in your learning plan.

Step 5: Critical reflection to assess outcomes of learning plan

Critical reflection includes a consideration of whether your practice has been consolidated or improved as a result of undertaking continuing competence activities. This critical reflection may occur independently, in discussion with peers, and/or in

⁶ See the Board's website at www.psychologistsboard.org.nz

supervision. Critical reflection also gives you feedback on whether a particular activity ought to be undertaken again, and/or whether modification of that activity or your practice needs to occur.

Sample questions to focus self-reflection might include the following:

As a result of my chosen activity/activities:

- Has my awareness or attitude changed? In what way?
- Has my knowledge been updated or refreshed? What areas do I need to develop further?
- What skills have I developed?
- How will I use the knowledge and skills I have acquired to enhance/change my practice?

You may also consider whether your chosen activity has impacted on outcomes for consumers and colleagues:

- Have I observed any positive impact on others?
- Does objective feedback from consumers/others confirm positive outcomes?
- How do I incorporate feedback either negative or positive into my continuing competence plan?

Competency self-assessment, setting objectives, and developing a plan is a cyclical process with insight into development needs gained both via situations encountered in practice, supervision, and consultation as well as through focused critical reflections.

Step 6: Declaration of competence

You will be expected to participate in continuing competence activities as part of your ongoing efforts to ensure competence. From early 2010, as part of your application for an APC, you will be required to declare that in the past year you have met the requirements of the CCP.

The Self Declaration includes a statement by the practitioner that:

His or her professional knowledge, skills, judgment and diligence are such that s/he is competent to practise.

She or he is committed to undertaking continual competence development and has met the requirements of the Continuing Competence Programme during the previous year.

Third-Party Declaration: In the event of an audit, a declaration will be sought from a person who is in a position to endorse your continuing competence programme participation. This person must have discussed with you your self-reflective review, the learning goals generated, and your ongoing professional development. This person may be your employer, supervisor, mentor, or peer who:

- is in a position to observe your practice, and/or
- has had sufficient professional contact with you to attest to your standard of practice and fitness to practise.

There may be circumstances where this declaration/endorsement is split between two people.

Supervision: *Supervision is an integral component of continuing competence. A supervision log should be maintained. This should show details of the nature and frequency of supervision.*

Frequency and mode of supervision may vary according to location, resources and context, and may incorporate any aspect of professional role (e.g., clinical, managerial, or cultural). Different supervisors or mentors may fulfil different roles, in which case these roles should be clearly identified. Distance supervision, telephone supervision, or online supervision (where this occurs) should be clearly recorded as such and attempts made to minimise potential disadvantages.

Your supervisor may or may not be the person who makes the third-party declaration in your APC application renewal.

Step 7: Retention of records of CCP

You should record brief notes on all CCP activities undertaken. A balance should be sought between avoiding administratively burdensome record-keeping versus sufficient detail to allow a clear record for audit or any other professional development purpose.

Records should be retained for future audit purposes. Psychologists audited in future years may be requested to supply retrospective records as well as those pertaining to the current year.