

DIVISION OF CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGY

GUIDELINES FOR THE EMPLOYMENT OF ASSISTANT PSYCHOLOGISTS

1. INTRODUCTION

This document has been written for the benefit of assistant psychologists, their employers and managers, to provide guidance on the employment of assistant psychologists. This guidance document should be read against the background of the BPS Code of Conduct, the (D.C.P) Guidelines for Professional Practice and the Whitley Council definitions of psychology grades in the NHS (AL(SP)4/92).

Assistant psychologists posts are often created to provide “extra hands” or to use otherwise unused funds. It is essential that these posts, and indeed established posts, have clearly defined, appropriate roles and that adequate supervision is provided.

It is recognised that some psychology graduates may legitimately be employed in departments other than psychology, for example, as audit assistants. These guidelines will enable employers who are not psychologists, to optimise the skills available to them.

Members of the Division should be aware that the following guidelines on the supervision of assistant psychologists fall within the provisions of that element of the Society’s Code of Conduct, which concerns responsibility for other practitioners. Failure to follow guidelines would therefore render the member liable to investigation by the Investigatory Committee in the event of an allegation by the assistant concerned.

2. RECRUITMENT

Advertisements for assistant psychologists should not imply that the posts offer recognised professional training in clinical psychology, nor should there be any implication of the guarantee of subsequent entry to a recognised training course (unless this is appropriate to local circumstances)

3. JOB TITLE

A consistently adopted title should describe the post. The DCP suggests that the appropriate job title is assistant psychologist.

4. ACCOUNTABILITY

Assistant psychologists can be managerially accountable to a clinical psychologist, or to a non psychologist manager. However, they must be professionally accountable to and receive supervision from a qualified clinical psychologist. This is not only a Whitley Council ruling, but is a requirement in order for them to be eligible for affiliate status of the BPS.

5. RESPONSIBILITIES AND BALANCE OF WORK

An assistant psychologist should not be employed to:

- substitute for qualified clinical psychologists
- undertake solely administrative or clerical duties for which a clerical assistant should be employed
- undertake tasks in areas where there is not a highly competent supervisor
- carry out the duties of a care assistant

The supervising clinical psychologist has a responsibility to ensure that assistant psychologists are not given work to do that is over and above their level of competence. However, it is important when determining an assistant psychologist's workload and work content, to strike a proper balance between using their graduate level skills, and not giving them tasks beyond their remit. The balance of work should ensure a manageable spread of duties, and should include time for supervision, administration, personal study, and opportunities to meet other psychologists. Some tasks which may be carried out under supervision are:

- research, audit and service evaluation
- literature searches, developing and maintaining training packs, information leaflets, libraries of equipment, and other tasks necessary to the efficient running of the service
- assessments of individuals and groups e.g. direct observations, formal psychometric testing, semi structured interviews, and writing appropriate reports
- assisting qualified clinical psychologists carry out prescribed interventions with individuals or in groups, and writing appropriate reports
- undertaking supportive work with carers, family members, health staff and other professionals
- assisting qualified clinical psychologists in delivering training for other professionals
- promoting clinical psychology services by providing relevant information to referrers, commissioners and others

The supervisor must ensure that the assistant has a realistic balance of work, reflecting their qualifications and experience and need to gain relevant new experience. If the assistant is working with clients, they should have an agreed maximum of face to face contact work per week.

6. PARTICULAR ISSUES RELATING TO CLIENT WORK

All clinical work is the responsibility of a qualified clinical psychologist, who will assess all referrals, and decide on treatment, the assistant will only carry out prescribed assessment and treatments. The assistant will receive a gradual introduction to client work (see section 8). In conjunction with the assistant, the supervisor will decide on the degree of autonomy the assistant will have with each case, and ensure that the client is told the involvement of the assistant in the case. Assistants will most usually work alongside qualified clinical psychologists, not on their own. Assistants should not:

- work alone with complex cases, including those that might evoke strong emotional responses for the therapist, e.g. victims of abuse
- provide specialist or complex therapy
- work on their own in any sort of emergency service e.g. helpline, drop-in , front-line crisis work
- be responsible for writing any report for Court, nor appear in Court to discuss a patient's treatment

7. FORMAL INDUCTION

A written induction pack should be provided which includes the specific requirements of the job, the assistant's role and responsibilities, and the supervisor's expectations of the assistant. Additional material may be provided for particular specialities.

The induction should include a minimum of two weeks structured introduction to the working environment, finding out "who's who", making relevant contacts and visits, and being introduced to other professionals. There should be familiarisation with relevant legislation, such as child protection and data protection, and with local policies, procedures, information requirements and quality standards.

8. INTRODUCTION TO WORK

After an initial introduction, the assistant should gradually be introduced to the work. The stages listed below are relevant to most types of work including client work.

1. The supervisor should provide relevant reading material, reading lists etc., to inform the assistant of theory and practice of the skills needed for the task
2. The supervisor should discuss with the assistant what they will be doing, and the supervisor will then observe the work being done
3. The assistant will have the opportunity to discuss what they observed, and will receive training if appropriate
4. This will lead to the assistant working alongside the supervisor, and agreeing the level of work they can take on
5. The assistant will be adequately prepared for their initial sessions on their own
6. The intensity of the supervision will gradually decrease as the assistant gains confidence and skills

9. SUPERVISION

It is a Whitley Council requirement that assistant psychologists receive supervision from a qualified clinical psychologist.

- the supervisor should be a qualified clinical psychologist who has received training in supervision, and is working in the speciality area in which the assistant is involved
- there should be an absolute minimum of one hour per week supervision carried out in a confidential setting without interruption
- the length and amount of supervision should reflect the experience of the assistant, the balance and amount of work, particularly client work, and be at a mutually convenient regular time
- supervision sessions should cover:
 - monthly objectives
 - reviewing work done during the past week, including a discussion of each client where relevant
 - planning the following week's work
 - both clinical and non-clinical issues
 - personal development
 - personal support and care
- alternative supervision arrangements should be made when the supervisor is absent
- supervisors have the responsibility of informing and liaising with staff with whom the assistants are to work. They should inform staff of the assistant's status, role and level of responsibility
- assistants should have access to a qualified clinical psychologist within one working day, even if over the telephone
- supervision for research may require extra time
- supervisors should periodically observe the assistants work to evaluate their performance

10. STUDY TIME

The assistant should be given at least one session a week to study work related issues. This time should be supported with relevant reading lists and followed up during supervision.

11. EMPLOYMENT ISSUES

Assistant psychologists may now be employed for more than three years see AL (SP) 4/2001. The DCP recommends that a minimum contract for an assistant psychologist should be one year, whilst recognising that there are some circumstances when a contract of less than a year might be appropriate.

Assistant psychologists have the same employment rights as other NHS employees on short term contracts and should receive information from their employer which will allow them to exercise those rights. If an assistant psychologist feels unfairly treated or otherwise disadvantaged as an employee, they should be able to communicate such concerns through their line management or through their employer's agreed grievance procedure. The supervisor should ensure that the following safeguards are in place:

- regular performance reviews
- peer support from other assistant psychologists and clinical psychologists in training as well as other clinical psychologists in the service
- availability of local policies at induction, and the opportunity to discuss them when necessary
- discussion about termination of or extension of contracts well ahead of termination dates - preferably two months ahead.

12. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This document has been put together by the DCP's Service Development Sub-committee following a considerable number of contributions from individuals and departments, and a wide consultation.

DCP December 1998

Revised June 2001 following the publication of AI (SP) 4/2001 para 8

'REMOVAL OF REFERRAL TO JOINT SECRETARIES

Paragraph 4.3 of Appendix D of Advance Letter (SP)4/92 is cancelled. This required the approval of the Joint Secretaries to employment Assistant Psychologists beyond 3 years.'