

Practitioner Psychologists – Standards of medical fitness to train

Introduction

This document has been drafted by HEOPS, following wide consultation, as guidance for those providing occupational health advice to institutions training students as Practitioner Psychologists, regulated by the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC), with regard to students' fitness to train and meet the required standards on graduation. All students should complete a health screening program before commencing clinical placements. The standards of proficiency for training in practitioner psychology are defined by the HCPC and the Department of Health (DH).¹ These standards meet the principles in the Equality Act in that they are a proportionate means of achieving the legitimate aim of ensuring safety of service users. These standards are primarily designed for students training as practitioner psychologists who have contact with service users in a hospital, clinic or health and well-being setting. Institutions training psychologists to provide services exclusively to organisations may need to apply adjusted fitness standards.

Prospective students who have serious concerns that a medical condition may have implications for future fitness to train as a doctor should, at an early stage, and even before making a formal application, contact the School and if appropriate be offered professional advice. There is an obligation on training schools to make reasonable adjustments for students with disabilities where the disability would not prevent the student from fulfilling the required competencies to graduate. There is no requirement to make adjustments to competence standards themselves.

Medical and personal information disclosed during the assessment processes should be held "in confidence" by the occupational health service. Medical details should only be given to managers and others outside the occupational health service in so far as it is necessary for them to discharge their management responsibilities, in accordance with the Data Protection Act. Explicit informed consent should be obtained from the student if it is necessary for medical information to be shared more widely. Managers in training schools should be informed of the nature of any relevant impairment, its effect on function, and adjustments necessary to allow the student to fulfil the required competencies for graduation and professional practice. Specific information about underlying causes should not be disclosed, except where this serves a specific purpose to protect service users or benefit the student, and only with explicit, informed consent.

The criteria for medical fitness to train are:

1. **Testing for immunity and infection** should be in accordance with current DH guidance, or an equivalent evidence based standard, for those practitioners working within the NHS. This will change over time. Students should protect service users, colleagues and themselves by being immunised against serious communicable diseases when vaccines are available. For those working within the NHS, the current DH guidance recommends the following:
 - a. TB – Evidence of immunity and freedom from TB disease.²
 - b. Measles, Rubella and Chickenpox – Evidence of immunity.²
2. **Assessment of functional capacity.** Examples of impairment needing careful assessment to ensure safe practice:
 - a. **Hearing and Speech** – Students must be able to demonstrate effective and appropriate skills in communicating information, advice, instruction and professional opinion to colleagues, service users, their relatives and carers. Hearing loss of 40dB across all speech frequencies should be referred to the Occupational Physician. Assessment of hearing should be after correction with hearing aids. Students should have the ability to speak clearly in English and be understood at 3 metres in quiet room with background noise of no more than 60dB.
 - b. **Learning, language and numeracy skills** - This refers to the student's learning ability rather than educational attainment. Students must have the ability to:
 - Communicate in English to a standard equivalent to level 7 of the International English Language Testing System (IELTS), information, advice, instruction and professional opinion to and from service users, colleagues and others¹
 - undertake and record a thorough, detailed assessment¹
 - gather and evaluate qualitative and quantitative data¹
 - to keep accurate, comprehensive and comprehensible records¹

Where a student has a disability causing impairment of these skills, the assessment should take into account the effects of reasonable adjustments that could enable the student to learn and to apply these skills appropriately in professional practice. An occupational health assessment can provide an objective opinion on the existence of a disability and advice on adjustments that may overcome disadvantage associated with the disability. The adequacy of these adjustments in enabling the student to achieve the mandatory competences may be better assessed by in-course assessments than evaluation in clinic.

- c. **Interruption of consciousness** – The risk must be low enough to represent minimal risk to service users.
 - d. **Concentration, awareness, memory and ability to learn and understand** – Students must be able to meet HCPC proficiency standards in relation to spoken, written and electronic communication with service users, colleagues and carers. Students must have a full awareness of their own mental health, when to seek help and from whom³. Students must be capable of understanding the importance of maintaining their own health¹. Students must understand the need to maintain safety of service users¹.
3. **The occupational health process** to assess fitness of students who declare specific functional impairments will usually require referral to an accredited specialist in occupational medicine. Screening and assessment should only be undertaken by qualified occupational health professionals or practitioners working under the clinical governance of specialist occupational health professionals. Occupational health opinions should always be provided by a suitably qualified practitioner, evidence based, logical and reasoned and should lie within a reasonable range of professional opinion.^{6,7} Depending on the nature of the condition being assessed, this process may involve:
 - a. Taking a full, relevant medical history.
 - b. Physical examination and functional assessment.
 - c. Full mental state examination.
 - d. Seeking targeted, specific medical evidence, with consent, from treating NHS doctors, Educational Psychologists or other specialists, to confirm diagnosis, severity, treatment and prognosis.
 - e. Referral for physical or psychiatric assessment by medical specialists without a therapeutic conflict of interest.
 - f. Reporting to the training School in a timely manner, in accordance with current data protection legislation and rules of medical confidentiality.
 4. **The format of health screening** should be in accordance with DH guidance and should include the following steps:
 - a. A health questionnaire completed and submitted to an occupational health service as possible after an offer of a training place is issued. GP certification of accurate declaration is desirable.
 - b. An interview with an occupational health nurse to clarify any answers on the health questionnaire and to undertake specific tests and vaccinations where appropriate.
 - c. Onward referral to an Occupational Physician if this is appropriate.
 - d. A health clearance certificate stating whether the student is fit to train and any adjustments necessary to allow the student to fulfil the required competencies for graduation and professional practice. This should be issued to appropriate managers or the head of course. This will not include any clinical information, is sufficient proof of health clearance for all UK universities and NHS Trusts, and should prevent the need for repeat screening for all placements and electives, in accordance with DH guidance.²

References

1. HCPC Standards of Proficiency - http://www.hcpc-uk.co.uk/assets/documents/10002963SOP_Practitioner_psychologists.pdf .
2. Health Clearance for TB, Hepatitis B, Hepatitis C and HIV – DH 2007. <http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/index.htm> .
3. The Management of Health, Safety and Welfare issues for NHS staff - DH 2005
4. Mental Health and Employment in the NHS - DH 2008
5. International English Language Teaching System.
6. Jones v Post Office [2001] EWCA Civ 558, [2001] IRLR 384, Court of Appeal
7. Kloss D Occupational Health Law ISBN 978-1405185905
8. Immunisation against infectious disease - 'The Green Book' – DH
http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Publications/PublicationsPolicyAndGuidance/DH_079917 .