

National Occupational Standards (NOS) for Healthcare Professionals Working in Police Custody Settings

Case Study

Forensic Medical Officers in Belfast

In Belfast, it was decided to conduct an in-depth review of NOS which describe two of the most frequently occurring and critical functions. In particular, the required levels of knowledge and understanding were analysed during the conduct of cases over a number of months. As a result, recommendations were made to adjust some of the levels of knowledge and understanding within the NOS. The NOS were also used to support a review of learning outcomes on the Forensic Diploma at the University of Ulster.

The Situation

In Northern Ireland, healthcare in police custody is delivered by Forensic Medical Officers (FMOs). There are currently 11 FMOs working with the police in Belfast; all of whom are very experienced in the role (typically with 15-25 years experience).

All the FMOs work on a retainer i.e. they are not employed by the police. This reflects the FMOs independence from the police, which is a distinctive feature of the model of service in Northern Ireland. This model of service developed during the troubles in Northern Ireland, when it was important that the FMOs were seen to be impartial. This has subsequently been recognised as a model of good practice in a number of other countries where it is a priority for healthcare provision to be independent from police.

The Aim

In reviewing the draft NOS, two areas were identified of particular interest and importance to the service in Belfast. Therefore, the field testing focused on these two NOS:

- Advise on the fitness of individuals for police interview
- Provide forensic examination and interpretation of injuries

The content of the NOS was found to be absolutely fit for purpose. However, it was decided to explore in more detail the *level* of knowledge and understanding described within the NOS. The levels are distinguished within the NOS with the following four stem statements:

Factual knowledge of...

Working knowledge of...

In-depth understanding of...

Critical understanding of...

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The Action

In order to analyse the required level for each item of knowledge and understanding, a matrix was developed to record the required levels in specific cases. Three FMOs were selected to record their findings:

- FMO with 16 years experience, dealing with approximately 1,500 cases per year.
- FMO with 25 years experience (qualified with the Forensic Diploma and Forensic Faculty Membership), dealing with approximately 1,800 cases per year
- FMO with 23 years experience, consultant forensic pathologist, (qualified with the Forensic Diploma and Forensic Pathology Fellowship), dealing with 1,000 cases per year.

In total, these three FMOs recorded their findings from 1,260 cases. Their findings were collated to identify areas where the levels of knowledge and understanding were found to be appropriate, and where they needed to be amended to better reflect the level needed of a fully competent practitioner.

The NOS were also used to review some of the teaching on the Forensic Diploma at the University of Ulster, in particular to focus on those areas that require a high level of knowledge specific to forensic practitioners.

The Results

In order to describe a required 'minimum standard' it was recommended that some of the items of knowledge and understanding (approximately one third of the total) should be put at a higher level. This aimed to reflect not only the levels of knowledge and understanding for the majority of cases, but also to recognise the significance of the minority of situations where there would be serious implications if the wrong judgements were made.

The Future

The NOS are seen as giving extra clarity and emphasis on the practical competence required by practitioners. In particular, the NOS are a means to provide an objective measure of a practitioner's practical competence.

In future, it is anticipated that the NOS will be more fully amalgamated into the teaching of the Forensic Diploma at the University of Ulster, possibly leading to accreditation of the practical experience required within the Diploma qualification.

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