

Competent counsellors: why high standards should not be optional



Counselling is a highly skilled job – yet currently anyone can set themselves up in practice. This has to change through accredited training that will guarantee minimum standards, says Simon Shepherd.

Would you get on a 'plane with an untrained pilot? Would you go under the knife of a surgeon who had all the dexterity of Frank Bruno, with his gloves on? No, I thought not – yet while many drug and alcohol workers are highly competent professionals, we all know that that is not always the case.

The DANOS national occupational standards, and the qualifications and certification schemes linked to them (including FDAP's Drug and Alcohol Professional Certification and the Health and Social Care NVQ framework) should help to drive up further the already high standards in our field, but DANOS doesn't cover everything.

While we would want to all doctors in the substance misuse field to be competent in the DANOS units relevant to their role, I for one would not be very happy going to see a doctor whose only qualification was an NVQ in Health and Social Care. Likewise, nurses working in our field need to be 'DANOS-competent' but being DANOS competent alone does not give someone all the skills and knowledge they need to work as a nurse.

Yet although counselling is also a complex profession, which requires a high level of skills and knowledge, currently anyone can set themselves up in practice and counsel often highly vulnerable clients, without so much as a correspondence course to their name.

Sooner or later this is going to change. The government is busy regulating a whole range of ancillary health care professions such as chiropractic, psychology and art therapy – and counselling is next on the list. But regulation is still a few years away – first we need to get all the different counselling organisations to agree on the right way forward. Because many of our members are counsellors, we have a seat on the working party – it's a bit like pulling teeth and trying to herd cats at the same time. And regulation will be based on certain minimum standards and will, we fear, fall a long way short of guaranteeing the kind of highly professional counsellor workforce we need – which is where the various 'gold standard' counsellor accreditation schemes come in.

We believe that anyone working as a counsellor should either be, or at least be working towards being, accredited by one of the recognised counsellor organisations.

For counsellors working in the substance misuse field, there are a range of available options – from generic schemes like that of the British Association of Counsellors and Psychotherapists (BACP), to the substance-use-specific National Counsellor Accreditation Certificate (NCAC) offered by FDAP.

As with nurses and doctors, counsellors working in our field need not only to be competent as counsellors, but also to have the skills and knowledge required to work in drug and alcohol settings. The advantage of substance-use-specific counsellor accreditations, is that as well as demonstrating a

person's competence as a counsellor they also provide evidence of competence in a number of relevant units from the DANOS standards.

And the advantage of our NCAC counsellor accreditation over other counsellor accreditation schemes in our field, is that it is the only one to confer eligibility for the UK Register of Counsellors (UKRC).

FDAP was admitted to the United Kingdom Register of Counsellors (UKRC) as an accrediting body in 2004. This entitles all our NCAC accredited counsellors to apply for UKRC registration on the same terms as the accredited practitioners of the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) and Confederation of Scottish Counselling Agencies (COSCA). Registrants of the UKRC are able to include their details on the online UKRC register and can advertise in the UKRC corporate box in Yellow Pages.

Admission to the UKRC will also make our NCAC accredited counsellors well placed when it comes to the regulation of counselling. While we can not be sure exactly what the regulation requirements will be, it is clear that anyone who is eligible for the UKRC will certainly be eligible to call themselves a counsellor under whatever regulatory framework is eventually put in place.

Simon Shepherd is chief executive of the Federation of Drug and Alcohol Professionals. For more information about FDAP's NCAC accreditation – or DANOS-based Drug and Alcohol Professional Certification – see under 'Professional Certification' at www.fdap.org.uk.

Under the standard route to NCAC accreditation, applicants must demonstrate:

- Competence in the full range of 'core functions' of drug and alcohol counselling.
- A clear personal philosophy and approach to counselling.
- An ongoing commitment to professional development.

In addition, they must have:

- Four years of work experience as a counsellor – at least 2.5 years in substance use field.
- 600 hours of supervised face-to-face individual, couples or group counselling – at least 400 hours in substance use field.
- A further 300 hours of supervised experience related to other 'core functions' – at least 200 hours in substance use field.
- 450 hours of training relevant to the counsellor's role in the drug and alcohol field.

Subject to satisfactory references from a supervisor and professional referee, experienced counsellors will be eligible for NCAC accreditation if they have four years' supervised experience as a drug/alcohol counsellor and are already accredited as a counsellor by one of the following organisations: BACP, UKCP, COSCA, NAADAC(US), IC&RC, BPS (as a counselling psychologist), or any organisation recognised as an accrediting body by the United Kingdom Register of Counsellors (UKRC).