

The Irish Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy

Position Paper on Statutory Regulation 2015

Introduction

The Irish Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (IACP) is the largest professional representative organisation in Ireland for the profession of counselling and psychotherapy. The association has almost 4,000 members across Ireland, many of whom are educated to degree level.

The IACP was established in 1981 to identify, develop and maintain professional standards of excellence in counselling/psychotherapy. We represent the interests of client and counsellors/psychotherapists in Ireland. We act as a link between those who are looking for counselling/psychotherapy and those who provide counselling/psychotherapy. The IACP promotes best practice and the development of the profession as well as safeguarding the public.

In addition, we set and maintain practice and training standards and develop high standards in the profession. The IACP has established a comprehensive Code of Ethics and Practice. A central part of our vision is a future where all people can access regulated professional counselling/psychotherapy services and where counselling/psychotherapy are an integral part of healthcare provision.

Regulation

As the possibility of regulation for the profession of counselling/psychotherapy in Ireland gains momentum at political level, the Irish Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (IACP) is carefully considering the implications this will have for the profession, practitioners and the public.

CORU, the umbrella body comprising the Health and Social Care Professionals Council and 12 registration boards, has already begun the process of regulating some health and social care professions.

Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) - the State body responsible for maintaining the ten-level National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) - recently published a draft consultation document on proposed academic standards for counselling and psychotherapy in Ireland.

Furthermore, former Minister for Health James Reilly gave a public commitment to regulate counselling/psychotherapy, a position that is supported by many members of the Dáil. The Minister with responsibility for this area, Kathleen Lynch has restated this commitment and has signaled that she wants the sector to be regulated by the middle of 2015.

Regulation is to be strongly welcomed and will bring many advantages. For example, there will be a better understanding and recognition of counselling/psychotherapy. In turn, this will see it become part of the educational apparatus of the State and offered more widely as a degree in universities. Regulation is also to be strongly welcomed because it will safeguard the public, especially those who are most vulnerable. In light of the move towards regulation, it is pertinent that the IACP carefully reviews and defines its position on the subject. The IACP is eager for regulation of the profession to come into effect as soon as possible. The IACP also wishes to ensure that there is agreement within the profession - including agreement between professional associations - on the academic and practice standards at which regulation should be introduced.

The IACP's priority is that that the baseline academic level suggested for regulation of a counselling/psychotherapy will be based on clear evidence and rationale and we would like to clarify our position on regulation in relation to the following points:

- 1. IACP does not distinguish between counselling/psychotherapy**
- 2. IACP sees no proficiency difference between counselling/psychotherapy**
- 3. IACP recommends that counselling and psychotherapy should be regulated by the State with the same baseline academic and practice qualifications**
- 4. Other regulatory considerations**

IACP does not distinguish between counselling/psychotherapy:

A major unanswered question is one that is most fundamental to the profession and the public. The question is: “What is the difference between counselling and psychotherapy?” The IACP’s position is that there is no difference between counselling and psychotherapy, as we have found no practical or research evidence to support differentiation. As the largest association in Ireland for the counselling/psychotherapy sector in Ireland, we are well aware of the wide variety of views on this question. We recognise that the terms and their usage have evolved and adapted over time, and have been subjected to a broad range of geographical and historical influences.

The discussion of this subject has brought both helpful debate and strong disagreement. The IACP appreciates that there are many differing opinions. We encourage all stakeholders to progress this matter by considering the evidence and opinions on this issue and to engage and contribute to further discussion. Opinion alone is not enough and evidence is required to support those opinions.

The IACP sees no proficiency difference between counselling/psychotherapy:

IACP has been exploring this question further by looking at research, evidence and international practice. In summary, the IACP notes:

QQI's view: In the 2014 document published by Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI): *QQI Awards Standards for Counselling and Psychotherapy*, no attempt was made to differentiate between counselling and psychotherapy and QQI has presented standards that can be applied to either or both terms. Additionally, no attempt was made to define either or both terms. In the QQI draft that was presented for public consultation, QQI initially differentiated between the standards for counselling and psychotherapy. However, when it was pointed out that no evidence base existed to support this view, QQI changed the document to show no difference. QQI clearly state that it will be up to the professional organisations and the regulator to make any such distinction.

The international view: We have found that many international organisations do not specify a difference. For example, the Canadian Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (CCPA), which has 5,000 members, and the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP), which has 39,000 members, do not differentiate between counselling and psychotherapy.

BACP Research: The British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy's (BACP) position is they do not differentiate between counselling/psychotherapy as they have found no empirical evidence that there is a difference between counselling/psychotherapy. In terms of role, value and effectiveness, the BACP believes that each occupational area has equal value. The BACP's research committee is an independent group, comprised of psychiatrists, psychologists, counsellors and psychotherapists from the UK and overseas.

It also includes several non-BACP members and is tasked with offering independent advice on research issues to the BACP. In 2006, the committee found there was "no theoretical,

practical or research rationale for distinguishing between counsellors and psychotherapists." (BACP Research Committee Report, 2006). In other words, they were unable to provide evidence to differentiate between counselling and psychotherapy.

Interchangeable usage of terms: We have found a high level of overlapping and interchanging of the terms counselling and psychotherapy by a wide variety of practitioners, course providers (including in the advertising of courses), agencies and associations throughout the profession, both in Ireland and abroad. The IACP's list of courses shows that both terms are interchangeable: Log on to www.iacp.ie to view the register of IACP accredited Counselling / Psychotherapy courses.

QQA: QQA - the UK's Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education - found no reliable evidence of a significant difference between counselling / psychotherapy. The QQA benchmark statement on counselling and psychotherapy states:

"Despite numerous attempts by organisations and individuals to distinguish between the knowledge base, skills, responsibilities and activities associated with counselling and psychotherapy, there is no reliable evidence that indicates any significant difference. It is clear that the descriptive title given to professional psychological therapists depends largely on the core theoretical model to which they adhere, the setting in which they practice, and to some extent on the training they have received. Both terms are used to describe the explicitly contracted therapeutic process through which personal concerns are described, explored and processed. The term counselling has its origins in the word counsel, meaning 'to advise', but in contemporary professional practice advice is not part of normal practice."

Having carefully considered all of the information presented above the IACP concluded that little, if any, research has been done on the subject and that there is no evidence to support the idea of a proficiency difference. Further, the IACP also believes that the basis for suggesting regulation at different level appears unsound.

Therefore, the IACP also clearly states that we see no proficiency difference between counselling and psychotherapy. It is on this basis that the IACP will continue its push for the

statutory regulation of counselling/psychotherapy. The IACP welcomes and will openly consider any empirical evidence produced that supports a difference.

IACP recommends that counselling/psychotherapy should be regulated by the State with the same baseline academic and practice qualification:

IACP recommends that counselling / psychotherapy should be regulated at the same baseline academic and practice qualifications. The IACP has reviewed QQI's stated educational outcomes and proposes, on the basis of this expert information, that the baseline academic level at which counselling / psychotherapy be regulated, is at a minimum of level 8 on the NFQ. The IACP encourages and supports all practitioners to further their education and to educate themselves to higher academic levels (e.g. levels 9, 10).

IACP wants counselling / psychotherapy to be properly connected to the education system of the state and not be seen as an add-on profession. This will happen through discussion with the Departments of Education, Health, the HSE and successful regulation outcomes.

Other regulatory considerations:

While the IACP proposes having the same baseline academic and practice standards for both counselling/psychotherapy, we believe that there are other important regulatory considerations that we must consider and advise on. These include the following topics:

Reducing public confusion: There is much public confusion about titles and functions within mental health. Professional associations working in this sector believe that the differences between psychiatry, psychology, counselling, psychotherapy, psychoanalysis and social workers practicing counselling are unclear to the public.

Regulatory proposals need to define the academic and practice levels with empirical evidence and concise definitions of scope and practice. To suggest regulating without detailed engagement in this task would add to an already confusing environment.

The IACP plans to discuss co-operation and development with counselling psychologists in relation to the overlapping areas of our professions and how the public can be best informed. For example, there needs to be a discussion about the use of the title and term “psychological therapist”.

When selecting a therapist, clear, evidence-based information relating to scope and proficiency must be provided. Any proposal to regulate at different levels indicates a proficiency difference – e.g., where one can be viewed as “better” than the other, or able to deal with matters that the other cannot. No evidence exists to support this and the IACP believes this would be unsound and would add to public confusion.

Agreed Definitions: Multiple definitions and perceptions of counselling and psychotherapy exist. For example, various estimates - up to 400 - of the number of types of psychotherapy exist. Adding to the confusion is the fact that the practice of psychotherapy was originally restricted to medical doctors (until the mid-20th century).

Also the therapeutic counselling/psychotherapy is sometimes confused with counselling/psychotherapy qualifications in one area only (e.g. guidance counselling qualifications or specific ‘addiction only’ counselling/psychotherapy qualifications) that are not accredited by the IACP.

The IACP believes work needs to be done to define the terms and to inform the public. Until this is done, the existing confusion aids those individuals and groups who seek to blur the lines about their qualifications and status. Where no evidence of a proficiency difference exists, regulating at the same level helps the public by making it easier to understand that practice and outcomes are the same.

Increasing Public Safety: The IACP wants all counsellors/psychotherapists to be better qualified and believe this can be achieved by regulating counselling/psychotherapy at a minimum academic baseline of level 8. At present, training standards are so varied that separate titles are not a reliable guide to the skills and competence of each practitioner. The IACP recognises that regulation seeks to address this situation and supports the overall aim. Where no proficiency difference exists, having the same baseline academic and practice qualifications for counsellors/psychotherapists is a safer and better way in which to regulate the profession.

Financial Implications: Psychotherapy/counselling interest groups have put forward the suggestion that separate regulatory boards for counselling/psychotherapy be set up. This is a highly expensive and unnecessary suggestion. Psychotherapy/counselling have indistinguishable client outcomes and no empirical evidence, whatsoever, exists to support arguments for differentiation. As the largest organisation representing psychotherapy/counselling in Ireland, we have researched and are acutely aware of the massive legal, employment and administrative costs to the state of regulating a profession. IACP recommend that the profession of counselling/psychotherapy be regulated by a single regulatory board and avoid wholly unnecessary costs to the state.

Good Governance: The IACP aims for optimal governance not only in our own association but in the profession generally. It is important that no unwarranted or unfair advantages are given to any group to protect vested or conflicted interests. The IACP considers that those saying there is a difference, without producing evidence, run the risk of being seen as having a vested interest. This could include charging more to clients and creating an artificial difference. It would be unfair to psychotherapists/counsellors to regulate at a different baseline of academic and practical standards in the absence of empirical evidence. The IACP considers that empirical evidence is necessary for a regulatory difference to be made. Otherwise, a practitioner who describes themselves as a psychotherapist might find

themselves in a situation that clients decide not to go to them for therapy as the public believe they cannot do X or Y. Equally, a person describing themselves as a counsellor might find themselves in a situation that clients decide not to go to them for therapy as public believe they cannot do X or Y.

Confusion within the profession: The IACP believes that a declaration of a proficiency differentiation through regulating at different levels would cause confusion about the profession and negatively impact on it. In effect, it would create a division in the therapeutic field that does not exist in the workplace. Additionally, the IACP believes that there would be a serious adverse impact on the delivery of services by agencies, courses and private practitioners if differentiation was to be agreed. The IACP believes that the effects of such would also negatively affect clients and the public. The IACP believes that the profession needs to consider the legal and insurance implications of regulation on stakeholders - private practitioners, agencies, professional bodies and training bodies. In particular, the impact of any proposal to differentiate between the two would need additional consideration.

The IACP believes that the profession needs to consider the implications of regulation on inter-agency, inter-association and international agreements (e.g. reciprocity agreements between counselling and psychotherapy organisations). In particular, the potential negative impact of any proposal to differentiate between the two would need additional consideration. The IACP acknowledges that the current situation is far from ideal, with highly varied standards in training and practice and we applaud the principle of public protection. We welcome the introduction of regulation and believe that it is in the best interests of the public and the profession that no distinction is made between counselling/ psychotherapy.

The IACP Executive Committee

April 2015

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IACP: Irish Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy

BACP: British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy

CCPA: Canadian Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy

QQI: Quality and Qualifications Ireland

CORU: Health and Social Care Professionals Council