

## DISCUSSION PAPER

# Non-Medical Mental Health Referrals: A Guide For General Practice

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indicate that about 30% of the population are experiencing symptoms of anxiety or depression at any point in time.<sup>5</sup> In Hong Kong, Lee found the prevalence of psychiatric symptoms in an urban population sample to be 32%.<sup>6</sup> In the first Hong Kong based, community-wide, epidemiological survey, lifetime prevalence rates of 39% (males) and 19% (females) were recorded for 19 commonly diagnosed psychiatric disorders.<sup>7</sup>

### Abstract

*The results of part of a survey of mental health practitioners in Hong Kong are discussed with reference to similarities and differences in roles, definitions, education, training and professional regulation in their countries of origin. The need for more monitoring and regulation of non-medical mental health practitioners is considered in light of the concerns of general practitioners who want to make suitable referrals.*

**Keywords:** Mental health, education, training, professional regulation.

### Introduction

Interest in the mind-body connection has a long history. Research into how thoughts, emotions, moods and even personality can affect physical health has been prolific. It is now generally accepted that emotional disturbances, including stress and depression, may lead to and frequently occur together with physical disorders.<sup>1-4</sup> In the United Kingdom, studies

Given the high incidence of mental health disturbance in the general population, it is clear that the general practitioner has a pivotal role to play in diagnosing and caring for individuals in whom the etiology of presenting symptoms is psychological or emotional.<sup>8</sup> This may be regarded as a particular challenge in Hong Kong because of the well established tendency of the Chinese to somaticize emotional states<sup>9-11</sup> and because there is still significant stigma attached to mental illness.<sup>12</sup>

A number of alternatives are available to general practitioners in managing patients with psychological symptoms. Administering psychotropic medication continues to be a common method of treatment, although concern has been expressed about possible detrimental consequences arising from over-prescription.<sup>13,14</sup> Counselling is also a frequent strategy of choice in the management of psychological problems. While general practitioners themselves are in a good position to counsel such patients, few have received training or are familiar with the process of counselling.<sup>5</sup> In Hong Kong, a survey of general practitioners revealed that doctors have no difficulty in recognizing and differentiating anxiety and depression from other conditions and are

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alert to the fact that emotional disturbance may present as a physical disorder. However, when the use of medication is inappropriate or alternative measures seem preferable, "the emphasis on counselling or 'non-drug doctoring' is not substantial enough".<sup>14</sup>

While general practitioners themselves may undertake the psychological management of patients within a primary care setting, referral to another professional is frequently a consideration. Referral to and liaison with psychiatrists is increasingly facilitated by their presence on community mental health teams' and the role of psychologists in primary health care is well established.<sup>15-17</sup> Referral to social workers, counsellors and psychiatric nurses is also becoming more common.<sup>18</sup> However, the criteria and characteristics of GP referral with respect to mental health problems in Hong Kong are not yet well documented,<sup>14</sup> although we may speculate that resources are more limited and less accessible than generally desired.

Furthermore, while medical practitioners are carefully regulated, non-medical mental health professionals, by and large, are not. These individuals call themselves by various titles and possess a wide range of educational backgrounds.<sup>19</sup> When a physician recognizes that a patient would benefit from psychological help and believes that the skills of a mental health professional are called for, the problem becomes one of making an appropriate referral.

The purpose of this paper is to present part of a survey which was originally designed to review and explain the various qualifications and credentials of mental health practitioners in Hong Kong, for the benefit of prospective patients or clients, and to identify "qualified" practitioners providing English-speaking mental health services. Since this paper is intended for physicians and the qualifications and credentialing of psychiatrists are well known, only non-medical mental health practitioners will be discussed. The information presented here will focus on the practitioner

qualification requirements for the most common mental health professionals practicing in the United Kingdom. Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the United States, as well as practitioners trained and qualified in Hong Kong. Since the practice of psychology and psychotherapy and the provision of mental health services generally affects public health, safety and welfare, physicians need to know what training has been completed by the practitioner, what qualifications are held and which services are provided so that the best possible referral can be made.

## Method

The survey was conducted using a range of information gathering techniques. Standardized letters requesting information about educational and practice requirements for mental health workers were sent to the various regulatory authorities in the different geographic areas, such as: the British Psychological Society, the Australian Psychological Society and the Medical Board of California. Telephone and personal interviews were held with a large number of health care professionals who were helpful in referring the researchers to the most authoritative sources of information. Where available, printed materials by the professional and licensing bodies were also reviewed. As a result, information was obtained providing definitions, roles, training qualifications and regulatory agencies for each of the categories of mental health practitioners, according to the country of professional origin. In all cases, the requested information was received.

## Results

There is a wide range in the definition, role and level of education and training required for mental health practitioners in the six countries studied. The credentialing procedure, where it

exists, is based on the identification of key facts and specific criteria. For a full exposition of the survey, reference should be made to the original publication.<sup>19</sup>

## Psychologists

### Definition

In Hong Kong and in the United Kingdom there is no legal or standardized definition of a psychologist, although they are generally regarded as individuals who have completed

training at the Master (or equivalent) level (Table 1). In the United Kingdom, a Chartered Psychologist is one who is entered on the Register of the British Psychological Society as having reached sufficient standard for independent professional practice.

In the remaining countries surveyed, psychologists are defined, for the purposes of practice, with reference to established training and registration or licensing criteria. In the United States, the title of 'Psychologist' is regulated by certification laws and licenses which specify what activities constitute the practice of psychology.

Table 1: Psychologists

COUNTRY	DEFINITION	ROLE	EDUCATION AND TRAINING	REGULATION
HONG KONG	No legal or standardized definition. Generally regarded as Master trained individual.	Most employed in gov. depts., non-gov. organizations, subvented settings, universities. Some private practice.	Bach. Psych. Major AND 2 yr. Master. EP's have 2 yr. teaching experience also.	No Laws regulating practice. HKPS has Register of Psychs.
UNITED KINGDOM	No legal or standardized definition. Chart. Psych. deemed qualified for independent practice & listed in BPS Register.	Most employed by gov. health service & education authorities. Some private practice.	Bach. Psych. Hons. AND Master (or equiv.). Clinical Psychologist do 2/3 yr. Master (or equiv.). EPs have Postgrad. Teach. Cert. AND 2 yr. teaching experience also. Chart. Psychs. have 3 yr. approved postgrad. education/supervision.	No laws regulating practice. BPS has Register of Chart. Psychs. & approves training programs.
AUSTRALIA	One who has completed a training course in psychology acceptable to APS.	Most employed by gov. depts., statutory authorities, hospitals, health services, schools, universities.	Bach. Psych. Hons. OR Bach.(any) AND grad. qual. ALSO 2 yr. supervision. CPs have Master/member APS Clin.Div. EPs have teacher training/experience also.	Practitioners must be registered in state. APS approves training programs.
NEW ZEALAND	Reg. Psych. deemed qualified & listed in Register of Psychs.	As in Australia.	Bach. Psych. Major AND 2 yr. Master (or equiv.). CPs have 2/3 yr. post-qual supervision.	Register of Psychs. kept by gov. appointed board. Annual Pract. Cert. for gov. position.
CANADA	One who is registered, certified or licensed for independent practice of psychology in a province.	Employed in hospitals, schools, organizations, private practice & by government.	Master or Doctorate required for independent practice. Varies between provinces.	Provincial laws regulate practice & boards, associations oversee. CPA/APA approval of training programs. Reg./cert./license required.
UNITED STATES	One who has completed Ph.D. or D.Psy. training & is licensed to practice psychology in a state.	As in Canada. Psychs. provide services according to qualifications and experience.	Bach. AND Ph.D./D.Psy. from accred. program. ALSO supervision AND licensing exam. EPs may be licensed with Master.	State laws & regulations control practice. Various Boards, APA oversee. APA approval of training programs. License required.

Note: HKPS Hong Kong Psychological Society  
BPS British Psychological Society  
APS Australian Psychological Society  
CPA Canadian Psychological Association

APA American Psychological Association  
CP Clinical Psychologist  
EP Educational Psychologist

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Table 2: Social Workers

COUNTRY	DEFINITION	ROLE	EDUCATION AND TRAINING	REGULATION
HONG KONG	No legal or standardized definition. Generally regarded as in USA.	Most work for non-government organizations & government.	Bach. S.W. Major OR 2 yr. Dip. 2 yr. Master also available.	HKASW regulates practice of members
UNITED KINGDOM	No legal or standardized definition. Generally regarded as in USA.	Work primarily in psychotherapeutic teams. Some private practice.	Bach. S.W. Hons. OR Bach.(any)/experience AND C.Q.S.W. Some Master programs.	CCETSW regulates qualifications. BASW regulates practice of members.
AUSTRALIA	Someone who assists clients to identify needs, problems & take responsible action.	Employed in many settings incl. hospitals, schools, gov. agencies, private practice.	Bach. S.W. Major OR 2 yr. undergrad. education AND 2 yr. supervision (also Bach.).	AASW has some regulatory responsibility.
NEW ZEALAND	No legal or standardized definition. Generally regarded as in Australia.	As in Australia.	Various. Bach., Master, Dip., Associate degree. No supervision requirements.	No information found.
CANADA	No legal or standardized definition. Generally regarded as in USA.	Most employed by gov. or private agencies. Some private practice.	Bach. S.W. Major from accred. school. Some Master programs.	Voluntary registration in province. Membership CASW encouraged.
UNITED STATES	Licensed, Master trained practitioner qualified to apply social work principles, methods to achieve better adjustment.	Employed by government, non-profit or profit organizations, private practice.	Bach. AND Master from accred. school. ALSO 2 yr. supervision AND licensing exam.	State Boards Behavioral Sciences, NASW regulates practice. License required.

Note: HKASW Hong Kong Association of Social Workers  
 CCETSW Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work  
 BASW British Association of Social Workers

AASW Australian Association of Social Workers  
 CASW Canadian Association of Social Workers  
 NASW National Association of Social Workers

### Role

*Clinical* psychologists generally are qualified to construct, administer and interpret psychological tests, including diagnostic evaluation. They treat psychological, emotional and mental disorders with a variety of therapeutic approaches. They also engage in teaching, research, consultation and community education. *Educational* psychologists, in all countries surveyed, provide a broad range of psychological services to school children, their parents and adult learners, including psychoeducational assessment and diagnosis, counselling and consultation.

Generally, they deal with psychoeducational, emotional and behavioural problems that effect learning. They may also conduct research.

Psychologists perform similar roles and work in similar settings throughout the countries surveyed, although private practice is relatively more common in North America. In Hong Kong, most clinical psychologists work in government and subvented hospitals, clinics, social welfare organizations, disciplinary settings and tertiary institutions. Educational psychologists are mainly employed by the Education Department or non-government organizations.



Psychologists generally provide services and use techniques according to their training and/or experience, although this principle is more strictly a requirement in the United States than in other countries.

## Education and Training

Generally in the countries surveyed, 3 or 4 years of undergraduate education for a Bachelor degree with Honours or a major in psychology is followed by several years of postgraduate education and supervised experience.

In Hong Kong, Australia and New Zealand the postgraduate training for clinical psychologists is commonly a Master's degree, requiring satisfactory performance in examinations, supervised placements and a research dissertation. In the United Kingdom, however, postgraduate clinical programs are changing to a 3 year format, for which some universities are now awarding the degree of Doctor of Clinical Psychology. Educational psychologists in these countries require teachers' certification and/or experience prior to a Master's degree. British Chartered Psychologists have completed 3 years of approved postgraduate education and supervised practice.

In Hong Kong, the government continues to employ a small number of people as psychologists who do not meet the specific training and practice requirements recommended by the local professional body. However, the Clinical Division of the Hong Kong Psychological Society is currently providing additional training and supervision for individuals who wish to meet these criteria. Post-professional training in various branches of psychotherapy or research is becoming popular in many countries. An increasing number of practitioners obtain the degree of Ph.D. upon completion of an advanced thesis of research.

In the United States and, to a large extent, Canada, doctoral level training is required for

psychologists in independent practice, particularly in the case of clinical and counselling psychologists. Educational psychologists may have a Master's degree in an appropriate subject and approved experience.

## Regulation

In Hong Kong and the United Kingdom there are no laws regulating the practice of psychology. However, the Hong Kong Psychological Society and the British Psychological Society, respectively, maintain registers of qualified members, who are bound by a code of conduct listing professional and ethical standards for members. A Practising Certificate is issued annually to Registrants by the British Psychological Society, which also approves all training programs for psychologists. It must be noted that, although a substantial proportion of psychologists belong to these organizations, not all qualified psychologists are members. In Hong Kong, a considerable number of practising psychologists are also Chartered.

In Australia and New Zealand, psychologists are required to be registered in order to practise. Registration in Australia is a state responsibility and approval of training by the Australian Psychological Society is necessary. In New Zealand, a Register of Psychologists is kept by a government appointed board and an Annual Practice Certificate is required for a government position.

In Canada registration, licensing or certification for the independent practice of psychology is the responsibility of the province or territory and is administered by regulatory boards or provincial associations. Some universities work together with the American Psychological Society for accreditation of programs and credential review. In the United States, a license is awarded after completion of all educational and training requirements, a period of supervised experience

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and after passing a national licensing and a state board examination. Continuing education is required in some states for license renewal. Laws and regulations are published in each state for the practice of psychology and regulation of titles. The American Psychological Society accredits doctoral programs in psychology.

## **Social Workers**

### ***Definition***

Social workers in the field of mental health are variously titled social worker, psychiatric social worker or clinical social worker. In the United States clinical social workers are defined as licensed, Master prepared practitioners who are qualified to apply social work principles and methods of a non-medical nature to individuals, groups or organizations with a view to achieving better social adjustment (Table 2). While no legal or standardized definition for social worker was found for Hong Kong, the United Kingdom or Canada, social workers in these countries are also generally regarded in this way.

In Australia, social workers are defined as assisting individuals and groups in identifying needs and problems in their relationships and life circumstances, discovering options for effective coping, decision making and responsible action. Although no legal or standardized definition was found for New Zealand, it is widely regarded to be similar to Australia.

### **Role**

Social workers in the mental health field in all countries surveyed generally provide specific services to individuals, families, groups and organizations in which their knowledge of social resources is used in order to help clients achieve better adjustment. Specifically, they provide

referral, information and social services, as well as counselling and psychotherapy. They assist communities in the organization of social or health services and may conduct research.

In Hong Kong most social workers are employed by non-government organizations and the remainder by the government. As in the other countries surveyed, they are concerned with a wide range of client populations, from families with mentally handicapped children to the elderly.

## **Education and Training**

In most countries surveyed social workers complete a 3 or 4 year Bachelor degree or its equivalent. In Hong Kong, the United Kingdom and New Zealand candidates may also qualify by means of a diploma or supervised work experience. A Master's degree is optional in all countries except the United States, where it is a requirement. Training typically involves knowledge of theory combined with experience, although requirements for supervised practice vary. Specialization in mental health is frequently pursued at a postgraduate level. Doctoral programmes in social work are available in the United States.

In Hong Kong there are two undergraduate programs which include theory, field work and supervised practice, leading to a Bachelor degree or a diploma (which can be upgraded to a Bachelor degree). Postgraduate programs also combine course work and supervised experience leading to a Master's degree.

## **Regulation**

The survey indicates that licensing of social workers is practised only in the USA, although it is under consideration in Canada, where

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voluntary registration in each province currently provides a way of dealing with client complaints.

The Hong Kong Association of Social Workers regulates the practice of its members in the Territory, whose conduct is subject to the Association's Code of Ethics. Membership requires educational and training qualifications, as well as employment in an appropriate agency. In the United Kingdom and Australia, the national associations of social workers assume some regulatory responsibility. However, no agency regulating practice could be located for New Zealand.

## Counsellors

### Definition

In none of the countries surveyed could a legal or standardized definition of the term 'counsellor' be found and there were no laws regulating its use (Table 3). However, counsellors are generally thought of as individuals who have not obtained a degree in one of the usual mental health professions, although they may have a qualification in a related field. They also tend to assume a wide variety of roles, for which there is no standardization.

Table 3: Counsellors

COUNTRY	DEFINITION	ROLE	EDUCATION AND TRAINING	REGULATION
HONG KONG	No legal or standardized definition. Generally regarded as someone without usual mental health qualification.	Most work in private organizations, agencies.	No standardized education/training requirements. Some have Bach but not generally mental health field. Most trained in organization.	None.
UNITED KINGDOM	As in Hong Kong.	As in Hong Kong.	No standardized education/training requirements. BAC accred. members have 3 yrs. supervised training/practice (or equiv.). Some postgrad. programs.	BAC accredits qualified members.
AUSTRALIA	As in Hong Kong.	Most work in gov. agencies.	Some have Bach. (Psych/any). Some postgrad. & specialized programs.	State counselling associations provide ethics code & guidelines.
NEW ZEALAND	As in Hong Kong.	As in Australia.	As in Australia.	No information found.
CANADA	As in Hong Kong.	As in Hong Kong.	No information about standardized education/training requirements.	No information found.
UNITED STATES	As in Hong Kong.  MFCC is licensed Master/Doctoral practitioner in marriage & family practice.	As in Hong Kong.  MFCC works with individuals, couples, families, groups.	No standardized education/training requirements. Many postgrad. programs. MFCC has Bach. AND Master/Doctorate from accred. program AND 2 yr. supervision.	None.  MFCC regulated by state board. License required.

Note: BAC British Association of Counselling  
MFCC Marriage, Family & Child Counsellor

## Role

Counsellors generally engage in a wide variety of activities aimed at helping people with their psychological and emotional problems. Many work in private organizations and agencies. In Australia and New Zealand, most are employed in government settings and are trained to provide help to families and couples.

## Education and Training

None of the countries surveyed had any standardized education or training requirements and the background of counsellors varied considerably. Some countries offer graduate degrees or specialized programs in areas such as guidance counselling or marriage and family counselling. In the United Kingdom, if a counsellor wishes to become an accredited member of the British Association of Counselling, she/he must complete 900 hours of training and supervised practice over a minimum 3 year period, or its equivalent.

## Regulation

Generally speaking, the activities of counsellors, in all countries surveyed, are subject to the least regulation. Hong Kong, Canada and the United States have no regulatory agencies for counsellors, although many states in the United States are certifying Mental Health Workers after completion of a specific training program. In the United Kingdom, the British Association of Counselling provides accreditation for its members. In Australia, all states have local counselling associations with a code of ethics and guidelines for practice. No information could be found for New Zealand.

The Marriage, Family and Child Counsellor (MFCC) is a US licensed Master or Doctoral

prepared mental health practitioner whose practice focuses on marriage and family adjustments. An MFCC is qualified to apply counselling principles and a variety of therapeutic methods to individuals, couples or groups. They are regulated by the State Boards of Behavioural Sciences.

## Discussion

With the growing acknowledgement of mental health problems and needs in general practice populations, and the prevailing emphasis on primary prevention,<sup>20</sup> attention increasingly falls on the role of the general practitioner in providing and mediating appropriate services. While the general practitioner is in the best position to assess the need for referral to a non-medical mental health practitioner, once that decision is made, the question of making the best referral is one that requires care and consideration.<sup>5</sup> A complicating factor in making such a decision may be uncertainty about the qualifications and experience of mental health providers, what services may be expected and how quality can be assured.

In examining the results of the survey it is clear that mental health practitioners in Hong Kong have a wider variety of training, qualifications and professional backgrounds, which contrasts markedly with the more predictable characteristics of psychiatrists, to whom referrals are commonly made. Education and training requirements are particularly variable, both between professional groups and across the countries surveyed. While no direct comparison of university and professional qualifications is possible between countries, educational criteria for practice range from non-graduate diplomas to doctoral degrees. Psychologists, in all countries studied, are subject to the most lengthy training while counsellors, generally, have the fewest educational requirements.



Regulation of mental health professionals is also found to vary considerably. Psychologists are regulated in all countries surveyed although, in Hong Kong and the United Kingdom, regulation is voluntary rather than statutory. Social workers are subject to voluntary regulation in most countries, except the United States, where licensing is mandatory. Counsellors, with the exception of Marriage, Family and Child Counsellors, are the least regulated group of practitioners, as well as being the most diverse in terms of training, background and practice.

With reference to the roles performed, a considerable degree of homogeneity is observed within professional groups across countries. Some geographical variation is evident in the extent of involvement in private practice, which is considerably more common in North America.

The private practice sector in Hong Kong gives cause for particular concern. The lack of statutory regulation of mental health titles, such as psychologist, psychotherapist, therapist and counsellor, and of services provided can lead to misrepresentation and abuse by those who are unqualified or insufficiently qualified to practise. Of course, even among qualified practitioners, there is no guarantee of competence or ethical practice, or indeed of satisfaction with the outcome. In light of this, the fact that many qualified practitioners are not bound by ethical requirements or subject to professional disciplinary procedures in the event of misdemeanour is a serious matter. This is particularly important because of the limited legal protection afforded the clients and patients of non-medical mental health practitioners in Hong Kong.

## Conclusion

The information gathered in this survey supports the need to develop more comprehensive regulations to govern the qualifications and

conduct of non-medical mental health professionals in Hong Kong. Such regulations would serve to promote accurate professional title identification, avoid misinterpretation of qualifications, prevent improper advertising, discourage practitioners from functioning outside their field of competence, as established by their training, education and experience and ultimately serve to protect the Hong Kong public. ■

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