

# The Independent Practitioners Network: An Introduction

Denis Postle

(with assistance from Richard House, Keith Pearce, Susanna Piohtee, Nick Totton and others)



*The Independent Practitioners Network (IPN) is an increasingly substantial feature of the UK psychopractice landscape, with the celebration this autumn of its tenth anniversary since founding. By the term 'psychopractice' we include any activity in which people engage with themselves and others in enquiring into their personal functioning, their relationships, their politics, their deficits, their wishes, dreams, spirituality and so on. Thus 'psychopractice' includes both psychoanalysis and co-counselling, both NLP and the native American tradition....*

*What follows is an updated version of the 'Briefing Document' which has been displayed on the 'ipnosis' website for a number of years <http://ipnosis.postle.net> The original document sought to answer the questions that clients, employers and other interested parties might have about IPN.*

Denis Postle is an artist, writer and musician who has had a counselling, coaching, supervision and psychotherapy practice in West London for over 17 years. He has co-run a variety of personal and professional development workshops and training focussed around cooperative enquiry and facilitation. His approach to psychopractice seeks to integrate politics, psychology and spirituality.

## What is IPN?

IPN is a national network of practitioners which offers an accreditation or competency route based on continuing peer assessment. Practitioners in IPN come from a wide variety of therapeutic and educational backgrounds. IPN was founded in 1994 and is independent of training and accrediting bodies. updated on an ongoing basis, outline its structure and aims.

## How does IPN work?

The basic unit of the Network is a member group of at least five and, usually, not more than ten practitioners. Practitioners may negotiate to join an existing group, or join with others to form a new group. The business of the group is getting to know each other both personally and as practitioners, so that we can 'stand by' each other's work, and that we are satisfied through our ongoing personal experience of our fellow group members that each is competent to do what they say they do. Just how this is done is left up to the autonomous 'local ecology' and personal preference of each individual group to decide: it can typically involve a self and peer assessment process, coupled with ongoing supervision/consultation about client work.

To be a full member group of IPN, each group is required to:

(1) develop and sustain links with at least two other groups that are prepared mutually to 'stand by' the quality of their group process. These link groups monitor, support, challenge and help deal with any problems which may arise;

(2) publish to the whole Network a statement of the group's ethical commitments.

The precise form taken by, or operational definition of, the 'standing by' process is again left up to the self-responsible autonomy of individual groups to determine; but there is an ongoing and evolving debate within the Network about the nature of 'standing

by' – a debate which in turn feeds into and informs individual groups' approaches to the process.

National Gatherings of the Network are open to IPN member groups, IPN participants (people whose group is not yet fully formed or which does not yet have links) and to other interested persons. Regional Gatherings are also held from time to time throughout the UK. A number of participants serve as regional contact persons (see leaflet included with this issue). Information is disseminated throughout the Network via paper and electronic media.

## Who runs IPN?

No individual or group runs IPN, neither is any individual or group empowered to speak for IPN. Proposed policies or procedural improvements/modifications are circulated to IPN participants and discussed at a National Gathering. Decision-making in the Network is through pluralistic consensus – defined as an ongoing process which considers all options available, listens respectfully to all views and, if necessary and appropriate, can support a variety of outcomes being pursued simultaneously. This approach implies an emphasis on issue identification, exploration and a 'sense of the meeting' (as in the Quaker tradition), rather than on adversarial proposals and counter-proposals. Unresolved issues are held open for further discussion, and all decisions remain subject to subsequent modification.

Individuals are empowered to promote or develop local initiatives, so long as they are within the broad spirit of the IPN Principles and Procedures framework and they don't claim to represent or speak for IPN as a whole. Policy and procedures evolve through ongoing discussion throughout the Network.

### Who can join IPN?

Participation in the Network is open to any practitioner. There is no individual membership, only group membership. In practice, joining or forming an IPN group is a demanding task requiring persistence, integrity, independence of mind, emotional competence, a capacity for negotiation and self-direction, and a developed ability to form and sustain relationships. These are qualities that mirror what a capable psychopractitioner might be expected to bring to the task of helping clients.

### How does IPN relate to the regulation of psychopractice?

IPN is devoted to client/practitioner accountability. While affirming the right of others to form 'professional' associations, whether register-based or trade alliances, many people within IPN regard the institutional professionalisation of psychotherapy and counselling as potentially or actually damaging to the interests of both clients and practitioners. A number of IPN participants and sympathisers have made a considerable contribution to the literature on the merits or otherwise of psychopractice professionalisation (see Further Reading section).



*Some IPN members,  
clockwise from top  
right: Nick Totton, John  
Talbut, Helene Fletcher,  
Graeme Thomas,*

### Why does IPN not have a central administration with an executive?

IPN attracts participants who see competent psychopractice as including awareness of interpersonal and social power-relations. From such a perspective, a horizontal, non-hierarchical, low-bureaucracy organisational approach seems a better match for the ways that most practitioners relate to their clients than 'chief executives', 'governing' boards, and 'investigating' committees that mimic existing top-down hierarchical arrangements.

### Is IPN open to Bernard Manning?

Theoretically it would not be impossible for Mr Manning to become a member of IPN, but to do so he would have to find a group of at least four practitioners who are prepared to stand by his work as a therapy practitioner. His group would have to produce a code of ethics and be seen as practising ethically by at least two link groups on an ongoing basis (which in turn would be monitored by at least two others, and so on...).

### How does IPN deal with grievances?

In the event of a conflict arising between a practitioner and a client, the practitioner's group will facilitate the situation using a conflict resolution model. When necessary, it can draw on its linked groups and, ultimately, on

the resources of the Network, to ensure that all parties feel the issue has been properly dealt with. We do not underestimate either the challenge which 'complaints' and grievances raise for everyone involved, or the unique complexities that accompany every conflictual circumstance; and as a Network, individually and collectively, we strive to be as non-defensive and even-handed as we are able in our responses to, and ways of dealing with, client-practitioner conflict.

### Does IPN have sanctions for inappropriate/ incompetent conduct?

If, following a grievance from a client reaching a participant's group, inappropriate/incompetent conduct is established, the group may withdraw, or make conditional, the 'standing by' decision that they have previously reached in relation to the participant. They may also ask the participant to leave the group. If the link groups are not satisfied with the way the grievance has been handled, either of them may withdraw their link, following which the linked group ceases to be a full IPN member.

### How does IPN ensure 'safe' practice?

IPN practitioners participate in what is, in effect, an intense, pro-active quality assurance programme that seeks to minimise incompetent and inappropriate practice through continuous monitoring.

Since this monitoring, which includes both participants' practice and their personal lives, is an ongoing and prospective, rather than retrospective, process, it also supports innovation and development rather than limiting them.

### Why doesn't IPN join existing professional umbrella organisations?

As will be apparent from the above, IPN participants highly value participation, power-sharing, parity, and peer assessment. These qualities are seen as congruent with the relations that they have with clients. Many IPN participants are deeply sceptical of the perceived domination-driven power relations of the therapy world's presently active umbrella organisations. This institutional style is seen as reproducing the dominance/subjection power relations at the root of almost all abuse in human relationships, and as profoundly incongruent with how their registrants actually relate to clients. For these reasons it seems inappropriate and incongruent that IPN join existing psychopractice umbrella organisations.

IPN participants highly value participation, power-sharing, parity, and peer assessment

### Can clients and employers presume that IPN participants are as reliable as participants in other accountability cultures?

Clients can presume that IPN members' practice and, uniquely, their personal qualities are subject to close continuing scrutiny; that their co-participants are

satisfied with their competence to practise in the mode and with the client population they have defined; and that in the event of difficulties, in addition to the practitioner's own group colleagues, at least fourteen other IPN participants from the link groups are committed to helping satisfactorily resolve any conflicts. Clients and employers may decide that this process is at least as reliable a route to competent psychopractice as other accountability cultures which emphasise one-off training 'qualifications', 'academic entry requirements' and punitive, naming-and-shaming misconduct detection processes that mimic the medical and other professions.

## Isn't IPN's practice of standing by each other's work' a recipe for practitioner collusion?

Collusion - secret/unconscious conspiracies to avoid noticing/challenging what we or others are doing - appears to be a universal human phenomenon that arises from our need to 'belong'. It is especially prevalent in institutions where coercion is used to enforce compliance with rules and regulations of which participants feel little or no 'ownership'. Being self-defining and co-creating, IPN groups are at least as likely to be free of these reasons for failing to notice unacceptable conduct. However, the possibility of collusion can, of course, never be extinguished even where practitioners' conscious anti-collusive intention is genuine and scrupulously conscientious; and one of the tasks of IPN link groups is to look out

As a client you can presume that your IPN practitioner is an active participant in a continuing process of face-to-face scrutiny of their competence, health and well-being

for and challenge collusive processes in their link groups on an ongoing basis.

## How does IPN benefit clients?

As a client you can presume that your IPN practitioner is an active participant in a continuing process of face-to-face scrutiny of their competence, health and well-being by a group of other practitioners who know them well enough to commit to 'standing by' their work.

## How does IPN benefit employers?

Due to the thoroughness and continuity of the IPN route to accreditation, employers can presume that the ethical standards and competence of practice within their defined area of work of members of IPN full member groups are entirely comparable with, and may often be superior to, that of practitioners who subscribe to institutional 'registration' and 'certification' forms of accountability.

## Will IPN attract unscrupulous practitioners?

This has not been our experience in our first ten years of existence. Not least, such persons would immediately see how unlikely it would be that they could conceal their tendency to abuse or exploit clients from the scrutiny of ongoing long-term group participation.

## How does IPN compare with other UK accountability cultures?

IPN provides an ethically sound and practical alternative to the four existing accountability cultures, BCP, BPS, BACP and UKCP. It seeks to value diversity and local knowledge rather than unitary, expert knowledge, and is supported in this by numerous research findings that there is little or no correlation between extensive theoretical knowledge, length of training and beneficial client outcomes. The IPN accountability process matches what we do in our contact with clients, i.e. it promotes autonomy, self-reliance and self-accountability, in interaction with significant and trustworthy others. As will be apparent from the above, IPN participants highly value participation, power-sharing, parity, and peer assessment. These qualities are seen as congruent with the relations that they have with clients. Many IPN participants are deeply sceptical of the perceived

To celebrate 10 years of the Independent Practitioners Network there will be an IPN London Regional Gathering, open to existing and prospective IPN participants, on Saturday November 27th 10:30am to 6pm at The Open Centre, 3rd Floor, 188 Old Street, London EC1V 9FR.

For details of this and other IPN Regional Gatherings, phone: 020 8995 6181 or 0845 345 8597 or visit: [www.ipnet.org.uk](http://www.ipnet.org.uk) or [ipnosis.postle.net](http://ipnosis.postle.net)

domination-driven power relations of existing umbrella organisations, which they see as profoundly incongruent with how their members actually relate to clients.

## In Conclusion

IPN is a remarkable piece of leading edge social innovation that reverses the top-down dynamic of conventional accountability structures in favour of devolving responsibility for competence and ethical conduct to localised, continuing, face-to-face contact. By its existence IPN is very challenging of the mainstream approaches to accountability, since it represents the kind of social creativity that is in danger of being eliminated or severely restricted by statutory regulation.

## Further Reading

House, R. & Totton, N. (eds), *Implausible Professions: Arguments for Pluralism and*

*Autonomy in Psychotherapy and Counselling*, Ross-on-Wye: PCCS Books

Mowbray, R. (1995). *The Case Against Psychotherapy Registration: A Conservation Issue for the*

*Human Potential Movement*. London: TransMarginal Press

IPNET [www.ipnet.org.uk](http://www.ipnet.org.uk)

IPNOSIS - a journal for the Independent Practitioners network  
[ipnosis.postle.net](http://ipnosis.postle.net)

On paper: ipnosis - a journal for freethinking practitioners

The Alexander Group PO Box 19 Llandysul Ceredigion SA44 4YE [www.ipnosis.com](http://www.ipnosis.com)