

Why join IPN

A practitioner's view



Arthur Musgrave

There are many good reasons for joining IPN to do with getting support, stimulation and opportunities for personal and professional development, but here I just want to concentrate on two –

- Because it's in the public interest
- In order to be properly accountable

I regard myself as a pluralist. I'm a BACP registered counsellor and supervisor. To become so I went through a paper based accreditation procedure in which those accrediting me neither met me nor spoke to me. I also belong to a full member group of the Independent Practitioners Network. To do this I had to say publicly that I am willing to 'stand by' the work of my colleagues in The Western Valleys IPN Group. Each of them, similarly, has reciprocally undertaken to stand by my practitioner work so that my reputation is tied to theirs – and vice versa. Together we had to find two other groups prepared to stand by our group process – so that their reputations, too, are linked to ours. This required considerable commitment and took more than just a year or two of regular meetings.

It seems to me that these two methods of making myself accountable are complementary. It's in my clients' interest that I should be as accountable as I reasonably can be. If they are unhappy, they can either use the BACP Complaints Procedure or take matters up through IPN's mediation frameworks. Unfortunately there is plenty of anecdotal evidence of the unsatisfactory nature of traditional institutional complaints procedures, irrespective of the actual outcome. I accept Nick Totton's argument that what we need to aim for is *good enough* conflict resolution: no complaints procedure, whether self-regulated (as BACP's is at present) or statutory, is sufficient on its own.

While I believe that my clients have the right to choose how they prefer to hold me to account,

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my preference is for structures of accountability that actively encourage the development of good practice. Daniel B. Hogan, whose 1979 book *The Regulation of Psychotherapists* remains by far the most extensive study of its subject, argues that regulation 'should be viewed as a method of facilitating the interaction of the professions and the public, in addition to being a method of controlling professional activity'.

One of the most important research findings in our field is that, overwhelmingly, the single most important predictor of a good outcome is the quality of the relationship that is established between practitioner and client. Who is to judge this? Surely it must be the client? Lester Luborsky has suggested that if patients could try several therapists and select one on the basis of their feelings, better results would ensue.

BACP relies only on indirect written evidence that I'm capable of developing and sustaining good working relationships. It has no effective means of knowing how I deal with questions of power and mutuality in relationship. The IPN framework of accountability, on the other hand, puts me on the spot in this respect – and keeps me there. To hold on to my membership of a full member group within IPN I have to maintain the confidence of at least 14 other individuals whose public and professional credibility is at stake when they make their judgement. That which is most fundamental to safe practice – my ability to maintain an effective working alliance – is continually being monitored.

This is at least as demanding as BACP accreditation. Furthermore there is no research that I am aware of to back the gold standard set by BACP (200 hours of skills development, 250 hours of taught theory, 40 hours of therapy or equivalent). And the requirements

set for UKCP registration are not backed by research either.

How do therapists choose a therapist? I know of few who rely exclusively on credentials published in guides like BACP's *Counselling and Psychotherapy Resources Directory* or UKCP's *Register of Psychotherapists*. Those of my colleagues I have questioned about this have all emphasised word of mouth reputation and/or recommendation. This is no different from the way most people go about choosing – for example – a builder. It seems fundamentally wrong for professionals to have one practice they expect the public to follow, but a different one for themselves. The best suggestion for creating a level playing field I know is Denis Postle's. He recommends that the public should be given as much access as possible to the information that would enable them to make an informed choice.

Being committed to IPN means being committed to openness, accountability, and – as far as possible – reciprocity. This is, I believe, the least we can do to respond to the accounts that clients such as Anna Sands, Natalie Simpson, Rosie Alexander and Ann France have written. Given these inadequacies in the existing arrangements for self-regulation – and irrespective of your position on statutory regulation – isn't it in the public interest for as many practitioners as possible to be held to account through IPN as well? After ten years of piloting a radically different approach to accountability surely it's time IPN was accepted

Further reading

Postle, Denis: 'Psychopractice accountability: a practitioner full disclosure list'. In Yvone Bates and Richard House (eds), *Ethically Challenged Professions: enabling innovation and diversity in psychotherapy and counselling*. PCCS Books, Ross on Wye, 2003.