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Mentoring Framework

Contributors:

Anna Middleton, Georgina Hall, Kathy Barnes, Gillian Scott, Heather Skirton, Sally Watts, Caroline Benjamin

GCRB Mentor Steering group

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Genetic Counsellor Registration Mentoring

The Genetic Counsellor Registration process has been in place in the United Kingdom since 2002. Genetic Counsellors wishing to register submit a portfolio of clinical evidence to the Genetic Counsellor Registration Board (GCRB). The portfolio also contains reflective commentary and appraisal of the academic literature with written work reaching QAA Level 7 (Masters) standard. There is an agreed set of guidelines from which to work, full details of which are available on the GCRB website (see www.gcrb.org.uk for details). These guidelines state: 'You have been asked to identify a Sign-Off Mentor to support you through your submission and to help you critically review and reflect on your evidence and practice issues'. The Sign-Off Mentor must be a Registered Genetic Counsellor with at least five years experience of working in a relevant post (after obtaining the relevant qualification that made them eligible for registration) AND undertaken the Sign-Off Mentor training provided by the GCRB. Ideally, the Sign-Off Mentor is employed in the same genetic centre as the applicant. The GCRB will maintain a list of Registered Genetic Counsellors who have undertaken the training. However, registrants are advised that the GCRB does not assess the competence of Sign-Off Mentors to undertake this role.

2. BACKGROUND

1. Genetic Counsellor Registration Sign-Off Mentors

The role of the Registration Sign-Off Mentor is to help the applicant to focus on preparation of the evidence needed to demonstrate competence for registration. The Sign-Off Mentor is expected to take some role in guiding the colleague towards development of the full range of competences and will also be involved in assessing these competencies. Registered Genetic Counsellors with 5 years experience at this level who wish to become Sign-Off Mentors must attend the GCRB Sign-Off Mentors Training Course.

2.2 Core definitions

What is genetic counsellor mentoring?

The aim of genetic counsellor registration mentoring is to promote the professional development of potential registration applicants, in line with the core competencies required for professional registration.

There are many different definitions of mentoring. Langridge (1998) described mentoring as 'the process by which one person assists another to grow and learn in a safe and supportive

relationship'; while Clutterbuck and Megginson (1995) believe that it is 'Off-line help by one person to another in making significant transitions in knowledge, work or thinking.' Mentoring is neither clinical nor counselling supervision. The AGNC and GCRB recognise the importance of both clinical and counselling supervision for all genetic counsellors (AGNC Supervision Working Group 2007). However, genetic counselling Sign-Off Mentors may not be trained counselling supervisors and therefore potential registration applicants should, like other genetic counsellors, have access to counselling supervision. Likewise, clinical supervision may be provided by other senior members of the genetics team.

The Sign-Off Mentor is also involved in assessing the clinical competencies demonstrated in the applicant's portfolio. This involves observing the applicant's clinical practice.

3. THE MENTORING FRAMEWORK

1. General background

The mentoring relationship can be divided into three distinct stages; **foundation, development and completion**. These are based around Moreton-Cooper and Palmer's (2000) description of three key phases of the mentoring relationship: initiation, development/working and termination.

Setting foundations and agreeing working guidelines achieve the first stages of the mentoring relationship. This is the time when the applicant and Sign-Off Mentor establish their relationship and set up their **framework**, with contracts, ground rules and boundaries to the relationship.

The next stage is the 'development' stage. During this stage the portfolio starts to take shape, via the process of education, review and feedback as part of the professional development of the applicant. The developing relationship promotes personal growth and confidence.

The final stage is 'completion'. During this time, the applicant will be finalising their collection of evidence for their portfolio and the Sign-Off Mentor will have an important role in ensuring this meets the standards for Genetic Counsellor Registration.

2. Induction

The Genetic Counsellor Registration Applicant Guidelines (see GCRB website for latest version) have been created to guide applicants through the process of registration. The

applicant must gather evidence for the submitted portfolio that demonstrates competence as a practitioner. Master's level practice descriptors are included in the guidelines to assist both applicants and Sign-Off Mentors.

Applicants are advised to work with their Sign-Off Mentors to create a timetable for review of the portfolio and this should definitely be incorporated over the six-month period of final portfolio preparation – ideally it will take place over a longer time period. Periods of leave should be noted and allowances made to accommodate these within the time frame.

When their relationship is established, the applicant and Sign-Off Mentor must explore the way they are going to work together. This involves setting up a contract (sample contract available on GCRB website), discussing boundaries and confidentiality and the practicalities of their meetings together.

3. Contracting

Contracting is a formal way of establishing the ground rules and boundaries of the relationship. The aims and objectives of the mentoring must be clearly established and understood by both the Sign-Off Mentor and applicant. Establishing these aims assists in evaluating the process as the portfolio progresses.

- Why are we meeting?

  This is the declared purpose, aim or objective of the mentoring relationship. Clearly established aims allow both Sign-Off Mentor and applicant to have a shared understanding of what is expected. For example, if the applicant has not recently written to Master's level, a strategy can be discussed to facilitate this aspect of the portfolio. It may be necessary for the Sign-Off Mentor to help the applicant identify other sources of support or suitable resources. Part of the contract could be the creation of a list of areas to cover, e.g. the Sign-Off Mentor shows the applicant how to do a literature search and how to reference correctly in written work.

- What am I going to do?

  As a Sign-Off Mentor, how do you see your role in the process? During the contracting phase, it is important to hear what the applicant's expectations of the mentoring will be (for example, how detailed is the feedback to be given?). Equally, it is important that the Sign-Off Mentor clearly states their expectations of the role of the applicant (for example, to complete written work on time or present written work for review at the proof-reading stage rather than at a draft stage).

It can be useful at the beginning to share some information about yourselves; such as the Sign-Off Mentor's experience of submitting their own portfolio. It will be important to have

an understanding of each other's background, and the skills and experiences both applicant and Sign-Off Mentor can use to contribute to the working relationship.

4. Boundaries

Discussing and agreeing boundaries sets out in a clear way how both parties are to behave to each other by asking the following questions:

- What is acceptable or unacceptable behaviour (e.g. how much time is needed for satisfactory feedback on written material)?
- Does anyone else need to be updated on the progress of the portfolio?
- What is meant by confidentiality?
- Are there any issues that are not appropriate to be discussed as part of the Registration process?

The key here is to talk openly and agree a way of working that is acceptable to both parties.

Sign-Off Mentors must be aware of their own professional boundaries and both parties should make full use of counselling supervision. If a patient triggers unresolved personal issues that fall outside the mentoring relationship, the Sign-Off Mentor should support the applicant in finding counselling support.

Although it is not practically possible in all departments, it may not be ideal for the Sign-Off Mentor to be the applicant's manager. From a relationship point of view, an applicant may feel less able to express concerns about their own performance to their manager. Also, there may be ambiguities between the role of manager and Sign-Off Mentor that could cause conflicts in some circumstances. Awareness of boundaries and open discussion around possible conflicts will be important.

5. Practicalities

Applicants and Sign-Off Mentor should meet at set times in a neutral environment, away from phones and interruptions. The practicalities of the mentoring sessions, frequency, where and how, should be discussed during contracting. Expectations around punctuality and timing may also be helpful. The formality of arrangements varies from one centre to another. Some Sign-Off Mentors share an office with their applicant and have an informal approach to support and answering questions as well as setting aside specific times for meetings. In other settings, this flexible support is not possible due to commitments of the Sign-Off Mentor and may not be appropriate for their working style. These Sign-Off Mentors

may prefer to restrict mentoring to preset sessions. In this situation, it remains important to ensure the applicant has access to support at all times for pressing or urgent issues.

There is no right or wrong way to set up the practicalities of mentoring and different styles will suit different Sign-Off Mentors and applicants. During this foundation phase, Sign-Off Mentors should explore how they want to work and agree this pattern of working.

6. Confidentiality

In mentoring relationships, confidentiality is an important element. The applicant must feel able to bring difficult issues and their own vulnerability to the relationship in order to explore and work on areas for development. In order to provide a safe environment for the applicant, the Sign-Off Mentor must offer confidentiality. During the contracting phase, the Sign-Off Mentor and applicant must explore the nature of this confidentiality, when it may be broken and what reporting duties the Sign-Off Mentor has. The Sign-Off Mentor and applicant should agree that the nature of individual cases or personal issues shared in mentoring would remain confidential. If there is a serious concern, confidentiality may need to be broken, for example if the Sign-Off Mentor feels a patient or the applicant is at risk. These boundaries around confidentiality should be part of developing the initial contract. Anonymised parts of a submitted portfolio may be shared where appropriate with GCRB Board members to ensure regulatory and quality responsibility is met.

7. Feedback

Feedback should take the form of general guidance and identify areas where the standard for registration has not been met, for example where evidence is inadequate, where referencing is incomplete or there are typographical errors. Sign-Off Mentors should not personally rewrite sections of the work.

3.8 Relationship

Throughout the foundation and development phases, the relationship between Sign-Off Mentor and applicant remains central to successful mentoring. Acknowledging the skills and experiences of the applicant and taking shared responsibility for the learning process promotes a more equal working relationship. Power in a supervisory relationship, the ‘expert’ and ‘pupil’, can restrict the applicant’s confidence and independence.

4. MENTORING SKILLS

The MNIE (2002) describes the mentoring role as ‘critical friend and co-enquirer’. The key elements of the mentoring process are:

- The promotion of collaboration and partnership in the learning process
- The notion of challenge to promote professional growth

‘At the start of this phase, your mentee may feel very reliant on you and want to use all of your skills and advice. This is a very active phase as the relationship becomes established and more intense. As mutual trust and sharing become more evident, your mentee may choose to be more discerning of the help and support as he/she gains confidence in his/her own work.’ (MNIE 2002)

This emphasis on collaboration and working together is central to mentoring. Sign-Off Mentors, who empower applicants to invest in their own growth and development whilst preparing their portfolio of evidence, will be more successful than those telling applicants what to do. In this way the skills mentors bring to the working relationship help the Sign-Off Mentor and applicant in their professional development.

Mentors will draw from many of their own experiences and skills.

- Signposting

  Sign-Off Mentors must be aware of their own limitations and boundaries. Therefore, there will be times where the role is to direct the applicant to another source. This may include clinical areas of work where other genetic counselling/clinical colleagues have more experience, it may be an outside teaching source (e.g. academic writing workshop), it may be personal development work (therapeutic counselling).

- Coaching skills

  This involves helping the applicant set goals, allowing them to establish their own aims and to have ownership of the portfolio. Effective feedback involves discussing why something has not worked as well as it should and deciding what to do to make improvements.

- Being a positive role model

  Within a successful mentoring relationship, the applicant will respect their Sign-Off Mentor, who should offer to share their experience of submitting a portfolio of evidence.

- Counselling skills

  As experienced genetic counsellors, Sign-Off Mentors will bring counselling skills to the mentoring relationship. Listening, empathy, exploring alternatives, challenging and action plans are just some examples of counselling skills that may be part of mentoring.

4.1.Sign-Off Mentor's Responsibilities

The Sign-Off Mentor has a responsibility to guide the applicant to submit a portfolio of the required academic standard that demonstrates ability to work as a reflective and competent genetic counsellor. The Sign-Off Mentor will be expected to sign a confidential reference to this effect, which will be submitted directly to the GCRB. Therefore the Sign-Off Mentor should reinforce the fact that work not demonstrating the competencies will be discussed in detail with the applicant as part of the mentoring process. After discussion, should the applicant still wish to submit a portfolio, which in the Sign-Off Mentor's opinion is not of the required standard, the Sign-Off Mentor should complete and sign the Sign-Off Mentor's reference, noting their concerns.

It is possible for both the Sign-Off Mentor and the applicant to approach a member of the GCRB for advice on the portfolio before submission. The SOM will receive a copy of the applicant's Registration outcome letter.

5. THE REGISTRATION PORTFOLIO

It is advisable to start planning the collection of evidence and completion of written work as early as possible, and the Sign-Off Mentor will be able to advise on this. Each section of the portfolio is presented in the table below with some suggestions. All evidence submitted must have occurred within 3 years of the intention to register submission date.

Record of evidence of Competence	The Sign-Off Mentor checks there is a broad selection of evidence and sufficient evidence is provided for each competence.
Record of Continuing Education	The Sign-Off Mentor will discuss the record of continuing education with an emphasis on the reflective comments and application to learning and sign off.
Case Logs	The Sign-Off Mentor should discuss and verify the applicant's role in each case and assess the notes before signing the case log. The Sign-Off Mentor should also check the applicant has the correct number and range of cases (this is particularly relevant to specialist genetic counsellors). The Sign-Off Mentor must observe 5 of the applicant's consultations and provide an assessment of these in their confidential reference.

Reflective Record of Counselling Sessions	The Sign-Off Mentor checks that there is appropriate reflection on the two counselling sessions and checks that adequate comment has been made on the counselling process by the counselling supervisor.
Case studies	The Sign-Off Mentor verifies the cases used, ensures referencing complies to Harvard formatting, that critical analysis of the literature is at Master's level and that there is sufficient reflection on each case. The cases must involve the applicant in a primary role.
Essay	The Sign-Off Mentor verifies the cases used, ensures referencing complies to Harvard formatting, that critical analysis of the literature is at Master's level.

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