



**College of Psychiatrists
of Ireland**

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The Consultant in General Adult Psychiatry: Roles and Responsibilities

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Contents:

Page no.s

1. Rationale for position statement	3
2. Summary	3
3. Definition	3
4. Clinical expertise	3-4
5. Other Key Skills	4
6. Communication Skills	4-5
7. Management/Leadership & Planning	5-6
8. Advocacy	6
9. Scholarship	6
10. Professionalism	6
11. Conclusion	7

The Consultant in General Adult Psychiatry: Roles and Responsibilities

1. Rationale for position statement

“We are all members of a caring profession, but being human, our motives are mixed and our performance may sometimes be flawed. A dose of personal humility is required as maintenance therapy”, Professor Tom Lynch RCSI

2. Summary

A Consultant General Adult Psychiatrist in Ireland is primarily a medical doctor who has completed a satisfactory period of postgraduate training in psychiatry, and has attained the relevant postgraduate qualifications recognised by the Irish Medical Council for placement on the specialist register in Psychiatry. The specialist may be appointed on a whole or part time basis to a consultant position in the Health Service Executive or an independent provider, or may practice independently in a private capacity.

3. Definition

A General Adult Psychiatrist is a psychiatric specialist who deals with the prevention, diagnosis, treatment and rehabilitation of mental disorder in persons between 18 to 65 years of age. However these age limitations need not be rigidly adhered to in certain circumstances such as inter-specialty collaborative practice. The Adult Psychiatrist is by reason of training, qualifications and continued professional development equipped with a reservoir of knowledge, skills and attitudes which allows the fulfilment of their role to the highest professional standards.

The specialist's clinical practice is governed by ethical principles common to the profession as laid down by The Irish Medical Council. These principles are underpinned by attitudes of respect, dignity and privacy among others. The competencies, responsibilities and attributes of the specialist psychiatrist can be conceptualised under the seven physician roles as described by the Union of European Medical Specialties - Section and Board of Psychiatry (UEMS 2005); adopted by the College of Psychiatrists of Ireland and consistent with Irish Medical Council's statutory guidelines.

4. Clinical Expertise

Clinical expertise is the central role of psychiatrists around which all other generic professional attributes are developed. Whilst it is recognised that a variety of skills are required for General Adult Psychiatrists to fulfil their role, clinical expertise remains core.

As clinical experts, adult psychiatrists provide specialist psychiatric assessment based on history, clinical examination and all relevant information, to ensure early detection of incipient or established mental illness using different models such as biological, psychological, sociological, developmental, behavioural and systemic. In so doing they provide a diagnostic assessment including risk assessment to best guide effective evidence based treatment planning in collaboration with the multidisciplinary team.

They practice within a multi-agency framework particularly in association with primary care and whatever other bodies, both statutory and voluntary that are relevant to this endeavour. Effective consultation begins with collecting a comprehensive psychiatric history, with attention to confidentiality and cultural diversity

issues. Following this, the Adult Psychiatrist performs and documents mental state and physical examinations; and will also determine and apply the necessary range of investigations to complete the diagnostic process.

The Adult Psychiatrist proceeds with synthesis and implementation of an integrated and individualised care plan using a multi- and interdisciplinary approach. In considering treatment options the Adult Psychiatrist will be trained to provide a range of evidence based treatments and will be skilled in their appropriate application and, in particular, their adverse effects and would discuss these with patients and carers.

In particular psychiatrists will be expert in a detailed knowledge and understanding of the risks and benefits of pharmacological treatments. They will have a wide experience of the application of such treatments and will endeavour to establish a concordance in treatment choices with their patients and their families. They will also have an expert knowledge in the application of physical treatment such as ECT and will have the skills to critically appraise other physical treatments as they are developed.

The General Adult Psychiatrist will also have an embedded foundation in psychological treatment approaches. This assumes an expertise in communication and psychiatric interviewing skills in association with theoretical and supervised clinical experience of short term and long term therapies. This allows the General Adult Psychiatrist to take an over view and make referrals for appropriate assessments. Some consultants will be accredited in specific psychological therapies. The General Adult Psychiatrist will continue to possess and maintain the clinical skills appropriate to a general doctor and the ability to apply these in their area of specialist practice.

This clinical expertise will allow the General Adult Psychiatrist to manage complex clinical cases who by definition may have multidimensional problems, comorbidity, chronicity, significant risk, serious functional and role impairment and treatment resistance. Consultant Psychiatrists practice as experts within the clinical discipline of psychiatry but recognise its evolution as a scientific discipline utilising the developments in molecular genetics, functional genomics, neuroscience, epidemiology and neuroimaging to understand the pathophysiology and pathogenesis of mental illness.

5. Other Key Skills

The General Adult Psychiatrist will lead the appropriate implementation of the MHA in accordance with the code of practice. The General Adult Psychiatrist will work in the appraisal, education and clinical supervision of trainee specialists in psychiatry and medical students. The General Adult Psychiatrist will be involved formally and informally, across disciplines in teaching and sharing the values of psychiatric practice. The General Adult Psychiatrist will continue to utilise critical appraisal skills in the evaluation of original research to assess their value and relevance for practice, and will audit their own practice and remain involved in research to ensure best outcomes for patients.

At all times, the Adult Psychiatrist will seek to optimise concordance by fostering a shared understanding with the patient and their carers on their illness and its treatment. They will review and revise their treatment plan and systematically evaluate outcomes over time. They will recognise, prevent and address adverse effects associated with the therapeutic interventions that they implement and also remain vigilant to medical conditions that may be incidental or contributory to the mental illness and its treatment.

These skills will be discussed in greater detail below.

6. Communication Skills

Communication skills (including written, electronic, verbal and non-verbal) are essential for specialist psychiatric practice. The Adult Psychiatrist depends on effective communication skills for obtaining and sharing clinical and other relevant information with patients, carers, support groups and other health

professionals. These skills are critical in establishing, maintaining and appropriately concluding therapeutic relationships with patients and their carers. They are also indispensable in working collaboratively with other psychiatric specialties, medical disciplines, voluntary and statutory agencies for effective patient care.

The Adult Psychiatrist is able to effectively handle challenging communication issues in a wide variety of clinical settings. These include obtaining informed consent, delivering bad news and overcoming language, cultural and mental state barriers in clinical information gathering. The Adult Psychiatrist uses good communication skills to advance the body of psychiatric knowledge through teaching and research and where appropriate, is able to effectively present information on mental health issues to the public or media.

7. Management/Leadership and Strategic Planning

As highly trained professionals, consultants have a responsibility to provide leadership in their clinical setting. In a general sense this requires the possession and demonstration of personal and professional integrity and values, being able to inspire and motivate, and to set out a clear vision and direction. This is particularly critical in the setting of general adult psychiatry which historically has not been clear in the boundaries of the service. This has not served our patients well and may have delayed the development of specialist services appropriate to their needs.

A clinical leader is able to listen to and take on board the concerns of colleagues, and enable the containment of anxiety within the team. They are clear about the boundaries of the service, carry a historical perspective and are a spokesperson and advocate. General Adult Psychiatrists also function as managers in their day-to-day practice when they make decisions that involve resources, tasks, policies, co-workers and their own personal lives.

Efficient resource management requires an understanding of the organisational features of national, regional and local (mental) health care structure. The Adult Psychiatrist will take a proactive role in planning and developing services with due regard to evidence base and cost effectiveness and, in doing this, relate meaningfully to health service administration both locally and centrally. In particular consultants will encourage innovative and imaginative ways of working whether initiated by themselves or other team members.

They will also ensure appropriate prioritisation of caseloads based on clinical severity, impairment and urgency. Where resource constraints are impacting on the wellbeing of staff and on the quality of care to patients General Adult Psychiatrists will act in the best interests of their patients to assertively communicate their concerns with management and seek an effective resolution. By so doing they will satisfy their ethical obligations to act as an advocate for their patients and staff. Individual consultants may take on more specific managerial responsibility as Clinical Directors within their service.

Concerning multi-disciplinary working the Adult Psychiatrist will be aware of the limitations of his/her professional skills, and acknowledge the separate but complementary background, educationally and skill-wise of other professional members of the multi-disciplinary team. He or she will have the necessary interpersonal skills and sensitivity to adopt a leadership role in team activity that earns respect and encourages cohesive working.

The ability to appropriately and effectively delegate tasks and responsibility is an important competency in this regard. Availability and accountability are central to the leadership role of an Adult Psychiatrist. As a leader the Adult Psychiatrist is accessible to patients, carers and other professional members of the team and will comprehend and empathise with their objectives and concerns. He or she will at all times remain accountable to patients, carers, fellow team professionals and employers.

Consultants, who are enabled by their team, service resourcing and job description arrangements to work in a consultative style, sharing their experience and expertise in a timely manner, are far more likely to

enhance the quality of care received by individuals than those who are diverted by relatively routine tasks. From a personal perspective, the Adult Psychiatrist is able to recognise and balance professional priorities to continually ensure personal well-being and sustainable practice.

8. Advocacy

The Adult Psychiatrist will proactively synthesise policies and projects that seek to optimise the mental health of individuals and populations, and collaborate with other community sectors to promote these. In the field of prevention the consultant will consciously progress such general health, social and educational issues as impact on the susceptibility of persons to mental disorder in collaboration with relevant stakeholders. This includes identifying and addressing barriers and inequity in access to care, particularly for vulnerable or marginalised persons or groups, as well as recognising and addressing prejudice, stigma and discrimination associated with mental disorder and its treatment. In pursuing this objective, Adult Psychiatrists will acknowledge the role of patient/carer organisations and relate to them in a meaningful manner.

Adult Psychiatrists will play a key role in the activities of the Mental Health Commission. They will bring their expertise to activities such as Mental Health Tribunals, Section 17 ascertainment and reports and in carrying out “second opinions”. Such activities will be performed professionally and impartially with the patients’ best interest as the overriding concern. Similar principles will also apply in consultants’ dealings with proceedings involving criminal and civil litigation. The Adult Psychiatrist will at all times defend, and within the limits of their powers, ensure the rights of their patients to receive appropriate mental health treatment based on best available evidence.

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9. Scholarship

This provides guidance for individual psychiatrists, College activities and research undertaken by psychiatrists. In relation to individual psychiatrists, this document aims to provide guidance on the boundaries of good practice for psychiatrists in their relationship with pharmaceutical companies and other commercial organisations as well as to help psychiatrists achieve probity and transparency ensuring that their judgement is not inappropriately influenced by commercial organisations. Key principles are transparency, full declaration of relationships with commercial organisation and the need to educate trainees to ensure good practice in their interactions with commercial organisations.

10. Professionalism

Adult Psychiatrists will conduct their practice in an ethically responsible manner that respects medical, legal and professional obligations. Their professional behaviour will be underpinned by integrity, values and evidence in a way that commands the respect of patients, carers, fellow professionals and lay public. They will maintain transparent relationships with commercial organisations (including pharmaceutical industry) based on sound ethical principles. They will recognise the limits of their own expertise and seek advice and support as appropriate.

11. Conclusion

This paper is not an exhaustive profile of Adult Psychiatrists. Its purpose is to serve as a useful guide to the key competencies they have acquired through training and the scope within which they practice. The idea of using core competencies to describe the attributes of Adult Psychiatrists is designed to draw attention to those aspects of their traditional training and practice that have not been previously explicit, thus enhancing the recognition and continued development of these broader competencies.

The Faculty recognises that Adult Psychiatrists train and practice within the context of a dynamic body of medical knowledge and ever-changing socio-political systems and health care infrastructures. This paper will therefore remain a living document that will be revised as frequently as compelled by relevant advances in knowledge and experience.