Scientist reporting of histopathology samples: practice and competencies

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A joint statement from the Royal College of Pathologists and the Institute of Biomedical Science

The Royal College of Pathologists (RCPath) and the Institute of Biomedical Science (IBMS) Histopathology reporting qualifications follow a four-stage training programme in one of three tissue specialisms: gynaecological pathology, gastrointestinal pathology and skin pathology.

Candidates are trained by qualified histopathologists to dissect and report a range of samples within their chosen tissue specialism. In parallel to the exposure to and experience of the gross and microscopic features of a range of normal and disease stages, candidates are required to gain a significant understanding of a wide range of pathologies that may be encountered in their chosen specialism.

Upon successful completion of the final Stage C examination candidates embark on a final Stage D 'preceptorship', with the compilation of a portfolio that demonstrates the samples they have examined and reported during this final stage. This preceptorship stage involves the development of a supervised specific independent reporting plan to support an individual to achieve a level of competence and confidence that will allow them to independently report the defined and agreed specimen types and detailed in the Stage D competency framework document.

The expectation is that an individual who completes any of the pathways will work alongside medically qualified pathologists as part of an integrated reporting team and will be able to dissect, independently report and present cases at multidisciplinary team meetings in their chosen specialism. They will also be expected to play an integral part in teaching and clinical audits as part of an overall service improvement strategy.

As with all other pathology/healthcare qualifications, the successful completion of the training does not confer automatic eligibility to practice; the eligibility and the scope of practice of an individual remains the decision and responsibility of the employing Trust and the medical head of department alongside the individual holding and meeting the terms of HCPC registration. While the RCPath/IBMS Conjoint Board runs and oversees the histopathology reporting qualifications, it is the responsibility of the employing department

to determine the actual scope of practice of these individuals, and the extent of their role and responsibilities within their employing organisation.

An individual may report a wider range of specimens than those on the Stage D list, with the agreement of their employer, if they have proven their competency to do so. Once an individual has successfully qualified from one of the RCPath/IBMS reporting qualifications their practice is beyond the jurisdiction of the College or the IBMS and would be a matter for each individual employing authority, organisation or Trust as is the case with all FRCPath and indeed all medical disciplines.

There is no barrier to the expansion of the scope of practice of a reporting scientist in response to service need. This would need to be agreed at a local level through appropriate governance arrangements, including being supported by full reporting competence assessment demonstrating reporting competence in the relevant areas by those doing the reporting, as is the case in all fields of medicine. How those competencies are demonstrated is also beyond the jurisdiction of RCPath/IBMS and at the discretion of the employing department, but any such process would need to be demonstrable, robust and able to hold up to scrutiny by external organisations such as United Kingdom Accreditation Service (UKAS), Care Quality Commission (CQC) and Health & Care Professions Council (HCPC).

The successful completion of Stage D may be viewed as an indication of individual ability, but not necessarily their job role, and a wider portfolio than the agreed curriculum may be completed. In such instances the RCPath/IBMS Conjoint Board would only be able to assess the agreed Stage D range of specimens.

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