

Charting client consent

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The varied contexts in which psychologists work and the differing nature and goals of the services they provide make it almost impossible to specify the precise procedures for obtaining client consent for services and associated matters such as fees, time commitments, confidentiality and clients' rights.

Psychologists are instead expected to exercise appropriate professional judgement in accordance with the Society's Code of Professional Conduct and the accepted practice procedures of experienced colleagues.

Psychologists harbouring doubts about the adequacy of their procedures for obtaining consent for their services should seek the advice of several experienced colleagues working in their field. If this is not possible, they should contact the APS National Office.

Some psychological interventions and services make greater demands of clients than others, for example, exacting a range of conditions that must be met for the intervention to be effective.

As a general rule, the more conditional the treatment, the greater is the need to inform clients about the conditions and their reasons. Clients must be aware of what will be required of them and their psychologist. Moreover, they should have time to consider, outside the professional context, whether to undertake such an intervention. Such interventions should be regularly reviewed at which time clients should have the opportunity to opt out.

The APS Ethics Committee strongly advises psychologists providing ongoing or regular services to use negotiated, written and signed contracts between themselves and their clients. Such contracts should be time-limited to allow for progress reviews and, if appropriate, renegotiations of a further contract.

As a general rule, open-ended time contracts are hard to justify in terms of benefit to client when an appropriate mechanism for client and psychologist evaluation is not regularly incorporated into the services provided.

Clients and potential clients deciding whether or not to accept a psychologist's services can reasonably expect to be informed about some or all of the following issues:

- The nature and extent of the services being offered, including whether a report will be written;
- Who will be providing these services;
- The professional qualifications and affiliations of those providing these services;
- The purpose and rationale for these services - including criteria for evaluating efficacy and progress;
- What will be expected of clients involved in these services in terms of time, homework, personal effort and so on;

- The likely costs of the services and any additional costs which might reasonably be incurred as a direct or indirect consequence of the services;
- The client's right to withhold information and to question the relevance of, and the reasons behind, the procedures adopted;
- What happens to the information gathered by the psychologist after the intervention (including disclosure to a referring third party);
- What the limits of confidentiality are (especially in forensic contexts where there is a reasonable possibility documents and/or the psychologist could be subpoenaed);
- The conditions under which information would be made available to other appropriately qualified professionals in accordance with those outlined in Section B4 of the APS Code of Professional Conduct; and
- Appropriate means of complaint or redress if the client is dissatisfied with the psychologist's behaviour or standard of service.