

## Eight years on

Being interviewed for the post of first Chief Executive of CRFP, eight years ago, I was asked how long I would intend to stay if appointed. Straight off the top of my head I said “Five years minimum, ten years maximum”. I’m a man of my word. The organisation has developed and the job with it: time for someone new to take things on, and I wish Peter Ablett nothing but the best.

To a specialist in professional regulation there is no challenge as exciting as establishing a new organisation. Sound preliminary work had been done but policies, structures, procedures and rules were all largely virgin territory. Opening up a blank book and starting to write was the right kind of thrill. This is the best job I have ever had.

We have held fast to the central principles we set down at the outset: independent assessment of competence, focusing squarely on real life casework; robust external quality assurance; transparent documentation and open references; equal treatment for all parts of the sector; universal, free access to the register; time-limited registration and no automatic right to it.

We lived through all the questions that arise whenever a new professional register starts:

- “I’ve been doing this job for 30 years — what do I have to prove?”
- “My daily work is my proof of competence”
- “My clients have never complained”
- “Filling in forms means time away from work”
- “Who is fit to assess me?”
- “My work can’t be measured by generic standards”
- “A register doesn’t guarantee nothing will go wrong” and our old friend:
- “Who will assess the assessors?”

I’d heard them all before but the simple fact is that professionals of all kinds face the same challenge in the modern world: no one takes their abilities or their credentials for granted any more; they must expect their advice to be questioned, even by inarticulate critics; and they must demonstrate, throughout their careers, that they have achieved, and are maintaining, the proper attitudes, knowledge and skills.

No one has singled out forensic practice, despite its high profile. It is a general trend for professionals and it is not going to change, despite the undisputed fact that UK forensic practice remains in many ways the envy of the world. Creating a register is the simplest way to define that thoroughly competent practice, put a boundary around it, protect it and celebrate it.

Have we achieved our objectives? In the main, I believe we have — simply because the register exists, is solidly established and is starting to be used. Those who commission forensic practice — lawyers, the police, the Legal Services Commission and Scottish Legal Aid Board — have a vested interest in quality assurance and risk management. Cases such as those of Barian Baruchi and Gene Morrison, fraudsters who managed to convince their astonishingly unwary paymasters that they had some form of expertise, demonstrate the power of the ‘cult of the expert’ and the danger of asking too few questions.

This year the case of Damilola Taylor has demonstrated not the register’s inadequacy but the need for it to go further — taking in scientists who participate in the forensic process but would not normally report to court. The enquiry by Brian Caddy, a man who caught the vision for CRFP at the outset, made a coherent case for this and I hope my successors will take it forward without delay.

In truth I would like to have gone faster but the register’s slow pace of growth was inevitable in an environment where people don’t usually do anything unless they absolutely have to. CRFP has yet to make much headway with forensic medical practitioners — a group, difficult to regulate, who are seeing their forensic work steadily eroded with the development of advanced practice by nurses, radiographers and others. And there are still too few users consulting the register before committing their cash to an ‘expert’. But that will come.

I have nothing but admiration for our enthusiastic group of professional assessors — now about 240 in number, all forensic practitioners — whose liberal gifts of time represent a real investment in the future of their professions. We have evolved a sound governance structure with a strong focus on the user. And we have a solid platform from which to extend the register to new groups: we are in serious discussion with forensic psychologists and accountants. Even the pathologists will come in eventually.

Eight years on the challenges have changed but the issue remains: how can the courts be assured that the forensic work of which they take delivery — painstaking, methodical, no stone unturned — is reliable and grounded in sound professional ethics? Many things are needed to secure that assurance. Give the definitive register a chance and all the rest will flow from it.

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