

Proposed Scope of Practice for Counselling in the Health Sector March 2022

Executive summary

The Ministry of Health has been working with NZAC National Executive representatives on options for members of the NZAC to be part of a Ministry of Health accredited mental health and addiction workforce. This collaborative project seeks to develop an accredited scope of practice for counsellors. It is proposed NZAC members would have the opportunity to 'opt in' to this new scope which will enable counsellors to work in contacts that are funded by the Ministry of Health.

NZAC Background Information

NZAC voted for an enhanced self-regulatory process in 2016, to further strengthen the commitment to their values and to support and facilitate increased professionalism within the sector.

In 2020 the National Executive convened a working party to advise it on reviewing the Association's self-regulation initiative. Members' feedback showed some felt misinformed before voting and believe that self-regulation has not achieved the gains that they had hoped for.

Coincidentally, the Ministry of Health has been reviewing how health professions are regulated in New Zealand, which has included consultation with professions such as counsellors and others not currently regulated under the Health Practitioner Competency Assurance Act.

Recent meetings between the NZAC President, Te Ahi Kaa and Ministry of Health representatives to discuss the counselling workforce for Mental Health and Addiction Services have indicated there is an interest and willingness by Health to work collaboratively with NZAC. Health's longer view is that the counselling workforce should be part of the current and future health services.

Ministry of Health Background Information

He Ara Oranga: Report of The Government Inquiry into Mental Health and Addiction identified as a priority the need to provide greater access to evidence-based talk therapies that can be delivered in a range of settings, including different cultural service models. He Ara Oranga also identified the need to build workforce capacity and capability to provide these evidence-based talk therapies.

Kia Manawanui Aotearoa, the long-term pathway to mental wellbeing, has priority action areas which apply to the development of the workforce. Two are relevant to this project.

- *Transform the mental health, addiction, and mental wellbeing workforce to enable it to respond to people's mental wellbeing needs and to intervene early.*
- *Expand the mental health, addiction and mental wellbeing workforce across sectors*

Additionally, expanding access to, and choice of, primary mental health and addictions services is the flagship initiative for the current Government and the cornerstone of the Wellbeing Budget 2019. There is particular emphasis on expanding access to services for people with mild to moderate mental health and addiction needs who are unable to access secondary mental health and addiction services. There has been a specific investment in new primary mental health and addiction services including services accessed via general practice, Kaupapa Māori, Youth and Pacific specific services. Expand access and choice of mental health and addiction supports and provide recovery-based care, prioritising kaupapa Māori and whanau-centred approaches and addressing equity

The Ministry of Health Manatū Hauora has several initiatives underway to 'Grow the Workforce', and this includes increasing the numbers of existing practitioner professional groups and also developing and assisting new practitioner roles within the Mental Health and Addiction Services.

There are experienced counsellors in New Zealand who would make excellent members of the workforce teams working with whaiora and their whānau in Mental Health and Addiction Services;

The Health Practitioners Competency Assurance Act (HPCA) provides a framework for the regulation of health practitioners in New Zealand and helps protect the public where there is a risk of harm from professional practice. However, not all health professions are regulated under the HPCA. The Counselling workforce in New Zealand is currently self-regulated. The Ministry acknowledges that each association has membership entry requirements and categories, continuing professional development, codes of ethics and complaints processes and disciplinary schemes and a commitment to cultural competency development and supervision in accordance with Te Tiriti o Waitangi (Te Tiriti).

The Ministry wishes to work with the New Zealand Association of Counsellors (NZAC) on a project to develop processes and practices within NZAC to allow individual members to apply for, and maintain, certification to work within the Mental Health Services within an agreed Scope of Practice

How did we get to an accreditation option?

Ministry of Health has recognised the existing health workforce is understaffed to effectively implement and run its current and future mental health and addiction services. The Ministry has also acknowledged the value in the counselling profession and recognises NZAC members' professional knowledge and expertise. The Ministry seeks to utilise the counselling profession so that the public has greater access to therapeutic services throughout the primary, community and secondary health sectors.

The Ministry of Health's Mental Health and Addiction Directorate have recognised that registering under *The Health Practitioners Competence Assurance Act* (the Act) would be too time-consuming, taking upwards of 10 years to complete. In addition, it is not the only way to guarantee effective, ethical professional and safe services for the public.

Subsequently, the Ministry of Health sought advice on alternative regulatory possibilities with a range of options on a continuum from state regulation to no regulation. The preferred option of co-regulation / accreditation has been agreed to as best meeting the needs of NZAC members, the public and the Ministry of Health.

What is a scope of practice?

This is not new, counsellors have been accredited to work under ACC Sensitive Claims and within the Family Court. A scope of practice gives counsellors accreditation to work within a specialist sector. What is different in this situation is that the Ministry of Health and NZAC create the scope of practice and agree to how this will be monitored, with NZAC maintaining the registering of counsellors and auditing as now with self-regulation.

Who will this accreditation scope of practice affect?

First and foremost, this scope of practice will ensure greater – and more equitable – accessibility of counselling services to the public who are either unable to see a mental health professional in the health sector due to long wait times or cannot afford to pay for counselling sessions.

Access to NZAC's workforce will also benefit Tangata Whenua and Pasifika communities as NZAC has a commitment in our responsibilities to Te Tiriti o Waitangi and ensuring equity in outcomes for all.

Mental Health and Addiction services provided by District Health Boards, Primary Health Organisations, and Non-Government Organisations – which have been unable to hire counsellors due to the profession not being registered under the Act – will have greater access to counselling professionals and therefore able to extend therapeutic services. Members will also have the benefit of a more varied career choice being able to have employment in the health sector which has not been available to counsellors within the current Ministry of Health Contracts as counselling is not registered under the Health Practitioners Competence Assurance Act (HPCA Act) .

The Ministry of Health's willingness to collaborate with NZAC on this scope of practice will lend more credence to NZAC and will develop a higher profile among the public that its counsellors adhere to the highest standards of competency.

How will it work?

Members can be accredited by NZAC to work in the specific scope of practice— a co-regulation model. This preferred method would support NZAC to establish a new scope of practice accrediting experienced counsellors to access health sector contract work.

Importantly, NZAC would still remain a self-regulatory membership body. NZAC would maintain its independence to greatly enhance the professional environment in which members can be trusted to provide highly qualified, effective and professional services that actively address and find solutions to emotional wellness issues.

Members who are in current practice with an Annual Practising Certificate (APC) and have either a Bachelor's or Master of Counselling Degree will be included. This complies with the NZAC Education Standards, effective from 1 January 2019. The exact details of the scope will be developed, what we do know now is these qualifications are a minimum requirement from the Ministry of Health.

Members who are in current practice with an APC and a Certificate, Diploma or PGDip of counselling will be grand-parented in a scheme yet to be developed if they wish to be accredited in this scope of practice. This process will need to be developed and members supported if they wish to opt into the scope.

Project Timeline

The collaborative project is predicted to be completed over the next four months.

The next steps are:

- National Executive has created a working party and is now contracting expertise to work on the project
- IT system and website re-development to support the changes needed as the scope is developed.
- Members to update profile information to flow into the development of scope of practice
- We will keep members updated with information regularly through emails and the newsletter.

Ngā mihi,



Christine Macfarlane, President



Gay Puketapu-Andrews, Te Ahi Kaa