



## Sustaining Humanity Through Being Fit to Practice

Joy Chukwudolue

### Abstract

The Health & Care Professions Council, who regulate biomedical scientists and other professions, define fitness to practice as having the knowledge, skills, health, and character to practice your profession safely and effectively<sup>2</sup>. Being fit to practice equips a Biomedical scientist with the skills and knowledge needed to perform a task safely and effectively in the laboratory. To understand fitness to practice better, I spoke with Tahmina Hussain and Ian Davies who collectively have decades of experience working as biomedical scientists. Mrs Tahmina Hussain has a background as a biomedical scientist, a pathology training coordinator, and is currently a university lecturer. Mr Ian Davies has over 20 years of experience working as a biomedical scientist, progressing to a senior Biomedical scientist role and then to a laboratory manager. Currently, he works as a university lecturer at Staffordshire University and a panel member for Health & Care Professions Council (HCPC) fitness to practice hearings.

As a biomedical scientist, in order to practice safely and effectively, it is necessary that you keep your skills and knowledge current and up to date. This is part of maintaining your Continuous Professional Development (CPD) which is mentioned in the HCPC Standards of Proficiency (SoP) 1.3<sup>3</sup>. It is difficult to practice effectively if you are following comparatively outdated methods. Examples of CPD activities are attending seminars, going to conferences, reading, and then reflecting on recently published journal papers. It is important to link these activities back to how they impact the practice of a biomedical scientist.

The title biomedical scientist is protected by the law and users have to be registered with the HCPC to use this title<sup>1</sup>. Professionals who have protected titles are expected to have a trustworthy character and thus conduct themselves appropriately in line with the HCPC standards.

Mrs Hussain believes fitness to practice can be shown in many more ways including the following:

- Being trained and competent in your role
- Being able to recognise the limits and scope of your practice
- Being confident enough to report when things go wrong
- Maintaining physical health, mental health, and your wellbeing
- Being respectful of colleagues and service users

In the laboratory, becoming competent involves undergoing a period of training and a competency assessment. This ensures the person performing the task or skill is performing it correctly and safely according to the Standard Operating Procedures. Biomedical scientists have a duty to work safely and respectfully as they handle sensitive patient samples. As Mrs Hussain mentions, it is important to keep in mind that there is a person at the end of each sample.

The Institute of Biomedical Science (IBMS) is a professional body. They support scientists, support workers, and students in the biomedical science field to deliver excellence in healthcare<sup>4</sup>. The IBMS provide the registration portfolio that applicants must complete before they can be HCPC registered. Completing the IBMS registration training portfolio takes the trainee biomedical scientist on a journey to become fit to practice while applying the scientific knowledge and theory they have gained during their

degree to practice. They gather evidence to showcase how they have developed the skills, knowledge, and character they need to practice as a biomedical scientist. Moreover, they learn about the importance of maintaining their mental health, physical health, and their wellbeing.

Mrs Hussain gave a simplified overview of fitness to practice: “expecting someone untrained to run a test on a sample who knows nothing about the test, how to process the sample, or how to interpret the result breaches the HCPC Standards of proficiency.” It is dangerous and could result in a patient being harmed. This is where HCPC fitness to practice hearings come in. I spoke to Mr Davies who is a panel member at these hearings to find out more.

When someone raises a concern to the HCPC about a registrant, it is screened to see if it is valid and meets the threshold for investigation. If so, the HCPC’s legal team puts a case together. They gather evidence through witness statements and accounts from the registrant, colleagues, and employers, as well as any involved patients.

The fitness to practice hearings are conducted by the HCPC Tribunal Service (see Figure 1). Those involved in a final hearing include a chairperson, a biomedical scientist (a registrant), and a lay member of the public. In Mr Davies’ experience, the chairperson usually has a legal background such as a barrister or solicitor and the lay person has experience working on other disciplinary panels.

As a panel member Mr Davies examines the evidence provided by both the HCPC and the accused registrant to prove that they are true. After testing the evidence, the panel determines whether the registrant is fit to practice. It is important to note that HCPC fitness to practice hearings occur to uphold the safety of the public. Rather than punishing the accused, the aim is to prevent the mistakes made from re-occurring.

A variety of reasons may cause a panel to deem a registrant unfit to practice:

- A lack of competence has made them a danger to themselves, their colleagues, and the public
- The registrant is poor at recognising the limits of their practise e.g. made multiple errors
- Misconduct: dishonesty, poor communication skills, intolerance to colleagues, or committed a criminal offence (which shows unprofessionalism)

In some cases, the accused registrant has already reflected on their behaviour and done more training. In this case they are now safe to practice, and no further action is needed. Most cases are unlike this.

Depending on the severity of impairment of practice, a variety of actions can be taken. The HCPC can put a caution on the registrant’s record; if the mistake repeats, it clearly displays a lack of improvement.

In one condition of practice, an accused Biomedical scientist cannot release certain results unless they have been verified by a registered Biomedical scientist. Another condition of practice asks the accused Biomedical scientist to retrain and show evidence of it. Also, the accused could be ordered to go on an anger management course and show a reflective diary of how they have controlled their behaviour.

If the Biomedical scientist has provided no evidence of adhering to these sanctions or the panel deems it is not enough, then the Biomedical scientist would be suspended from the register for about 1-2 years. During this period, they cannot practise or work as a biomedical scientist. If the Biomedical scientist still does not correct their behaviour or the allegation is quite serious, the Biomedical scientist would be struck off the register. That individual will never be able to work as a biomedical scientist again. This affects their livelihood, their families, their reputation. Mr Davies stated that this is not a decision that is taken lightly.



Figure 1. Logo of HCPC Tribunal Service.

From *Stages of a hearing for Registrants* by HCPCTS 2023. (<https://www.hcpts-uk.org/participant-information/stages-of-a-hearing/>). Copyright 2023 by HCPCTS.

Mr Davies shared some advice to future (and current) biomedical scientists on maintaining fitness to practice:

“Being fit to practice is a responsibility a biomedical scientist carries throughout their career. It is not just about following [HCPC] standards of proficiency and doing a normal job. It is about having that understanding of autonomy and how you are now responsible for your decisions and behaviour and how you speak to people and how you work with different groups.

The standards of proficiency are there to stop you getting to that point [of being struck off the register]. Always keep in mind what the public and patients expect of you. If you base your decisions around that, then you will not get to the point of having a fitness to practice hearing.

The HCPC standards of proficiency are there for a good reason. Embrace them as you go through your career.”

## **References**

1. Health & Care Professions Council. (2018). *Professions and protected titles*. Retrieved 27/03/2024 from <https://www.hcpc-uk.org/about-us/who-we-regulate/the-professions/>
2. Health & Care Professions Council. (2019). *Fitness to Practice*. Retrieved 27/03/2024 from <https://www.hcpc-uk.org/concerns/what-we-investigate/fitness-to-practise/>
3. Health & Care Professions Council. (2023). *The Standards of Proficiency for Biomedical Scientists*. Retrieved 28/01/2024 from <https://www.hcpc-uk.org/standards/standards-of-proficiency/biomedical-scientists/>
4. Institute of Biomedical Science. (2017). *About IBMS*. <https://www.ibms.org/about/about-ibms/>