

Professional Guidelines for Psychologists

**THE STATUS OF REGULATORY DOCUMENTS
IN THE REGULATION OF THE
PSYCHOLOGY PROFESSION IN ALBERTA**

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College of Alberta Psychologists

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There are a number of documents that form the basis for the regulation of the psychology profession in Alberta. Psychologists are obligated to familiarize themselves with these materials, to ensure compliance with the basic rules governing the profession. The purpose of this document is to provide a brief summary with respect to the role each of the documents plays in:

- regulating the profession in order to serve the public interest; and
- supporting psychologists in their efforts to provide optimal, quality services for consumers.

LEGISLATION

In Alberta, the profession of psychology is regulated pursuant to Alberta's *Health Professions Act* ("HPA"), and the *Psychologists Profession Regulation*. The HPA and the Regulation constitute the primary legislation that applies to all members of the College of Alberta Psychologists. The legislation establishes the criteria and procedures for entry to practice, and also sets out the provisions relating to the discipline process.

Under the HPA, the College is responsible for processing complaints received about a member's conduct. If a complaint is received and the matter is referred to a hearing, the Hearing Tribunal must determine whether the member has engaged in "unprofessional conduct" and if so, what sanction should be imposed as a result of the finding. "Unprofessional conduct" is broadly defined in the HPA, and includes:

- displaying a lack of knowledge of or lack of skill or judgment in the provision of professional services;
- contravention of this Act, a code of ethics, or standards of practice; and
- conduct that harms the integrity of the profession.

CODE OF ETHICS

The HPA authorizes the College's Council to adopt a Code of Ethics for the profession. The College has adopted the Canadian Code of Ethics for Psychologists.

The Code of Ethics articulates the ethical principles and values that apply to the practice of psychology. It broadly delineates the manner in which psychologists ought to carry out their practice. All other statements of how psychologists should or must conduct their practice must be consistent with this document and its ethical principles of respect for the dignity of persons, responsible caring, integrity in relationships and responsibility to society.

Under the HPA, a psychologist may be found guilty of unskilled practice for a number of reasons, including where the psychologist has breached the Code of Ethics.

Therefore, by virtue of the HPA, psychologists must abide by the Code, and should incorporate the principles contained therein into their every day practice.

Although a psychologist who breaches the Code of Ethics may be found guilty of unskilled practice, the Code itself is aspirational, in that it delineates the broad principles that psychologists should consider when making more concrete decisions in their every day practice. The Code acknowledges the possibility of differences of opinion in some areas, such as ethical decision-making.

In light of the nature and content of the Code of Ethics, and the fact that sometimes there are differences of opinion regarding what constitutes the right decision, complaints involving specific breaches of the Code may be relatively rare.

Nevertheless, the Code is relevant to some extent in the discipline process. As stated in the Preamble, the Code provides assistance "in the adjudication of complaints against psychologists by providing input to the judgment of whether the psychologist engaged in an ethical decision-making process and acted in good faith." Therefore, a psychologist who is the subject of disciplinary proceedings may be asked to explain to what extent he or she considered the principles set out in the Code when struggling with a particular ethical or practice issue. In addition, the Code includes some statements on precise conduct that is or is not acceptable.

In light of the foregoing, psychologists are clearly obligated to familiarize themselves with the Code of Ethics. Psychologists who consider and apply the principles set out in the Code in their every day practice are less likely to be the subject of a complaint, and will be better equipped to respond when and if a complaint is made against them.

STANDARDS OF PRACTICE

The HPA also authorizes Council to adopt Standards of Practice for the profession. According to the discipline provisions set out in the HPA, a breach of the Standards of Practice may also constitute unprofessional conduct. Therefore, psychologists must also familiarize themselves with and adhere to the Standards of Practice.

The Standards of Practice translate certain aspects of the Code of Ethics into behavioral definitions that constitute enforceable rules for the professional conduct of psychologists. The Standards of Practice differ from the Code of Ethics in that the Standards are more definitive in nature. The rules established in the Standards of Practice are often utilized in disciplinary hearings as a standard against which to judge a psychologist's conduct, and violations of any of the individual rules may be the basis for a finding of unprofessional conduct.

Consequently, it is equally important for psychologists to become familiar with the Standards of Practice for the profession.

PROFESSIONAL GUIDELINES FOR PSYCHOLOGISTS

From time to time the College adopts guidelines to support psychologists in providing competent and ethical practice in specific areas (often areas that are newly emerging or are controversial). By integrating the principles of the Code of Ethics, the

Standards of Practice, and current specialized knowledge in the area of practice, the College develops guidelines to support quality services for the benefit of consumers.

Although the College's authority to adopt guidelines is not specifically referenced in the HPA, and the Guidelines do not have the force of law, they may nevertheless be relevant in the discipline process. Guidelines that are relevant to a particular area in which a psychologist has chosen to practice help to define competent and skilled practice. Therefore, the Hearing Tribunal may refer to the Guidelines when evaluating a psychologist's knowledge and competency in a particular area of practice. Where a psychologist acts in a manner that is contrary to the College's Guidelines, the Hearing Tribunal may determine that the psychologist's behavior constitutes a lack of knowledge, skill or judgment, and therefore the psychologist's conduct constitutes "unprofessional conduct" under the HPA.

CONCLUSION

It is recommended that psychologists ensure that they are familiar with the College's Code of Ethics, Standards of Practice, and Professional Guidelines for Psychologists. Practicing in accordance with the principles and rules established in these documents will assist psychologists in avoiding complaints. If a complaint is received, psychologists who are familiar with and routinely abide by these documents will be better able to effectively respond to complaints that are received.

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