Clinical Governance – what does it mean for psychiatrists working in mental health systems?

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Clinical governance has been described in various ways, including ‘the integration of clinical decision-making with the structures and processes of the organisation’ and the ‘sharing of accountability for the quality of clinical services between clinicians and managers’.

Psychiatrists working in mental health systems typically engage in a wide range of roles, including those of clinician, teacher and leader. However, whilst psychiatry training has generally prepared junior consultants well for the roles of being an expert clinician and supervisor of other mental health staff, it has not consistently delivered psychiatrists who can show leadership on clinical governance issues.

The current system places significant demands on early career psychiatrists to become involved in a variety of quality improvement initiatives, in addition to negotiating an ever changing workplace being repackaged as ‘structural reform’ and ‘clinical redesign’. It is ironic, then, that whilst our advanced trainees enjoy two years of a well structured and supervised program to prepare them for the challenges of the next phase of their careers, the moment they step off the ‘end of the plank’ they are left potentially without any formal supervision or mentoring. All this occurs during a period when they are taking on, for the first time, very significant new clinical and supervisory responsibilities.

This paper will describe a process by which the author proposes to engage psychiatrists working in a large area mental health service in a developing dialogue around clinical governance issues. In particular, it will focus on attempts to provide mentorship to early career psychiatrists with respect to leadership and management issues, and a recalibration of our understanding of the phases of psychiatry career development, so that advanced trainees/junior consultants are seen more as closely aligned points on a continuum than merely the crossing of a threshold conferred upon one by the awarding of the FRANZCP.

Competing Interests
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