

# Consultation on Inter-disciplinary Practice and Qualifications The Hong Kong College of Pathologists

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## Background

In its formative period, in order to promote the advancement of knowledge of the science and art of pathology, the College established six pathology sub-disciplines as specialties. Although each has its own core competencies, it was never assumed that each would be rigidly compartmentalised. While different specialties may have differing focuses – such as the specimen types being examined, the methodology applied, or the aetiological agents targeted – apparent boundaries between sub-disciplines are not always well defined and should be expected to change over time due to the impact of emerging technologies and changing practices. With further development of new sub-disciplines, overlapping in knowledge pool would be expected.

The Council therefore wishes to consult Fellows so as to develop a policy framework to guide its future approach to inter-disciplinary matters. While three specific areas, with Council's view on each of them, are the main focus of this paper, Fellows are welcome to express their views on other related inter-disciplinary issues.

## Inter-disciplinary Issues

1. Should there be a clear delineation of the scope of practice between different pathology sub-disciplines?

### Council's View:

Though different pathology sub-disciplines are not defined by the same set of parameters, and may differ in specimen types examined, methodology used, aetiological agents targeted, etc., the boundaries between specialties have never been clear-cut. Furthermore, emerging technologies, new discoveries and changing practices have caused blurring of the accepted conventional boundaries of the time. As a recent example, applied molecular biology technologies, have matured and been rapidly adopted by every sub-discipline in pathology so that now we are faced with a choice as to whether molecular biology/pathology is a stand alone sub-discipline or a technology overlapping and shared by many.

On the other hand, though different sub-disciplines share a common set of basic laboratory management skills including administrative, scientific, risk management, quality assurance, and clinical audit, at times a pathologist of one sub-discipline may not be able to fully comprehend the scope of practice of another sub-discipline.

Therefore, with the reality of overlapping and converging practices, the Council holds the view that the nature of specialization in pathology should be more indicative than

restrictive, while at the same time it discourages truly cross-disciplinary practice. The Council maintains that, in order to practice a particular pathology sub-discipline, a pathologist needs to demonstrate competence by relevant work experience and by fulfilment of the College requirements on continuing medical education and professional development programs.

Furthermore, pathologists, as competent specialists, must be responsible for their own professional practices, and be aware of their limitations both within and outside their usual areas of involvement. Such areas of involvement, if necessary, could be determined by the relevant Specialty Boards on a case-by-case basis. Nevertheless dictating rigid interdisciplinary restrictions could create more problems than it will solve.

2. Should there be a distinction between being a report signatory for laboratory accreditation purpose and being recognised by the Hong Kong Medical Council as a specialist in pathology?

Council's View:

The Hong Kong Medical Council maintains a register of local practicing medical specialists and authorizes those registered to use the term "specialist" in that specialty. Such registration is voluntary; while many practicing pathologists, including some College Fellows, have not registered, they can still legally practice pathology in Hong Kong. Specialist registration is therefore only a legal indication, but not an restriction, of the core expertise of the individual pathologist.

The objectives of laboratory accreditation, on the other hand, are to ensure competency of carrying out laboratory testing and to improve the conformity to a widely-accepted standard of quality. Participation in the local laboratory accreditation scheme, run by the Hong Kong Accreditation Service with active participation of the College, is also voluntary. With a focus on quality and standards rather than on permission and authorization to use the specialist title, the Council sees a different role in supporting the objectives of laboratory accreditation when compared with that in credentialing of qualifications for specialist registration.

The Council therefore holds the view that it need not be a prerequisite for a College Fellow to register as a specialist with the Hong Kong Medical Council to become a report signatory for laboratory accreditation purposes. Similarly, in order to facilitate the assessment of standards by the local accreditation body, the College has maintained a list of recognized overseas qualifications (ROQs) so that pathologists holding ROQs, and who are therefore qualified to practice pathology in those overseas countries, could also be a report signatory under the local laboratory accreditation scheme. This recognition is restricted for the purpose of laboratory accreditation, and would have no effect on our assessment of an ROQ holder's application for specialist registration, should such an application be referred to the College for advice.

3. Should the recognition of overseas qualifications be specific for each of the accepted pathology sub-disciplines?

Council's View:

Different countries have different training and examination systems, and their specialist qualifications in pathology, in common with ours, may not be readily distinguishable in terms of areas of sub-disciplinary involvement. Therefore the assessment of comparability of their qualifications with ours can be very difficult and the documentation of different aspects of training experience may not be readily available.

From a training and examinations aspect, holders of recognized overseas qualifications (ROQs) can apply for exemption from our College membership examinations, but they still need to undergo further training and examinations in specific sub-disciplines in order to become our Fellows. In laboratory accreditation, holders of ROQs can apply to be a signatory of a test report for a test which, under the local laboratory accreditation scheme, they need not have personally performed. Under these circumstances, the Council considers that it may not be necessary for the ROQ requirements to be specific for each sub-discipline.

On the other hand, the Council maintains that the post-ROQ training experience needs to be specialty-specific. For example, in the one-off exercise conducted several years ago to enlist Founder Fellows to apply for specialist registration of the Hong Kong Medical Council, the ROQ requirements were required to be specific in some sub-disciplines.

Therefore the Council adopts a balanced view and a pragmatic approach, and takes into consideration the reasons for these qualifications being recognized, as well as the need to have more accurate quantification of the various areas of specialization.

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Council, the Hong Kong College of Pathologists  
July 2007

**Inter-disciplinary Practice and Qualifications Questionnaires:**

1. Should there be a clear delineation of scopes of practice between different pathology sub-disciplines?

I agree / disagree with the Council's view.

Comment:

2. Should there be a distinction between being a report signatory for laboratory accreditation purpose and being recognised by the Hong Kong Medical Council as a specialist in pathology?

I agree / disagree with the Council's view.

Comment:

3. Should the recognition of overseas qualifications be specific to different pathology sub-disciplines?

I agree / disagree with the Council's view.

Comment:

4. Other comments on inter-disciplinary issues:

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**Name and Signature of Fellow (Dated:    /    /    )**