

Improving Psycho-Legal Skills for Forensic Trainees: Evaluation of an Online Teaching Programme

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Background

Alongside developing clinical skills during higher forensic psychiatric training, it is necessary to develop clinico-legal skills at the interface between clinical decision making and law. This has been specified within the latest GMC curriculum for forensic psychiatry.

Delivering psycho-legal training via online ‘workshops’ provides trainees a structured education in clinico-legal skills and offers the opportunity to consider clinical, legal, and ethical issues in relation to a case.

Method

In April 2021 an online forensic teaching programme was established in North London, focusing on the interface between psychiatry and law. Initially developed in the East London Foundation Trust, it soon also became available to all forensic trainees in Barnet, Enfield and Haringey NHS Trust and West London NHS Trust. The training included a combination of didactic sessions on ‘core psycho-legal topics’ with more interactive workshops framed around either anonymised reports or ‘constructed cases’¹.

The ‘case types’ used were guided by South London Psycho-Legal Syllabus, with each case being linked to a legal construct.

At the start of the term trainees completed a questionnaire ranking their understanding of various psycho-legal topics (on a scale of 1-10) and were able to make suggestions for future topics of discussion. The same questionnaire was used to evaluate their level of understanding at the end of term and sought ‘open text’ qualitative feedback.

The questionnaire included domains not covered in the programme to help determine whether advances in trainee understanding could be isolated specifically to the teaching sessions.

1. Eastman N, Adshead G, Fox S, Latham R, Whyte S, *Oxford Casebook of Forensic Psychiatry*, Oxford University Press (in press)

Qualitative Feedback

Topics Covered



- Psychiatric Defences
- Criminal Justice & Prison Pathways
- Mens Rea
- Stalking & Harassment
- Extradition Hearings
- Fitness to Plead
- Sentencing

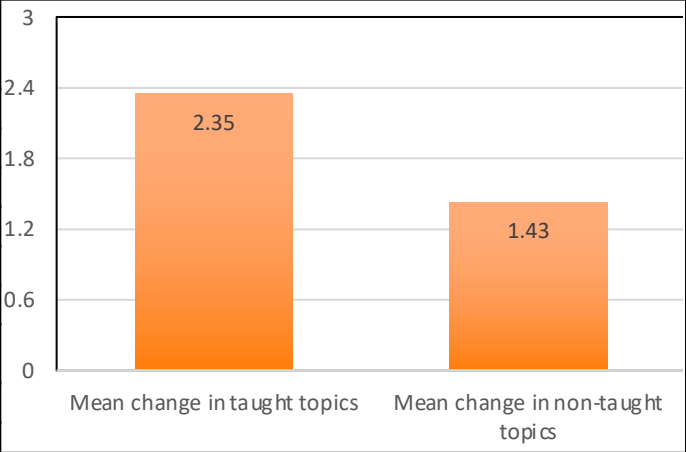
Understanding of the following Domains (Taught topics highlighted in green)	Pre-Term Average	Post-Term Average	Difference
Fitness to plead criteria	6.21	8.54	2.33
Application of the law with respect to fitness to plead	5.36	8.15	2.79
Key issues with respect to psychiatric opinion and suggestibility	5.14	6.08	0.94
Relevance of psychiatric evidence in extradition hearings	4	5.62	1.62
Application of the law with respect to the defence of Diminished Responsibility	4.93	7.54	2.61
Application of the law with regards to psychiatric evidence and Infanticide	3.71	5.08	1.37
Key issues with respect to psychiatric opinion in cases involving killing in pursuance of a suicide pact	2.93	4.77	1.84
Key issues with respect to psychiatric opinion and stalking	3.93	5.77	1.84
Application of the law with respect to the Insanity defence	5.21	8.15	2.94
Relevance of psychiatric evidence to the defence of Loss of Control	4.43	7.08	2.65
Relevance of psychiatric opinion to the defence of Duress	3.93	5.15	1.22
Relevance of psychiatric evidence with respect to Joint Enterprise	3.07	4.02	0.72
Different options available to the court at sentencing (including community disposals)	5.36	7.62	2.26
How a psychiatric opinion may assist the court when considering mitigation	5.07	7.31	2.14
How to provide a risk assessment for a criminal court	4.59	6.31	1.72
The difference between sane and insane automatism	4.5	6.62	2.12
How to assess a person's capacity to make a will	4.57	5.38	0.81
How to assess fitness to be interviewed	4.5	6.62	2.12
The process of diversion from criminal justice proceedings	4.79	7.15	2.36
How to assess capacity to form mens rea	4.29	6.62	2.33

Results

The evaluation showed that, on average, trainee understanding of all psycho-legal topics surveyed within the questionnaire advanced over the course of the term.

However, there was a greater improvement in understanding of taught topics when compared with those not taught (average increase in score 2.35 v 1.43).

Qualitative feedback suggested that trainees found the sessions helped to cover ‘gaps’ in their understanding of psycho-legal topics.



Conclusions

Developing psycho-legal skills is an essential element of psychiatric training, and is of particular importance for forensic trainees. This evaluation demonstrated that a combination of didactic methods and ‘workshops’ were both well received by trainees and resulted in advanced understanding of key domains.

Future studies would be improved by determining whether these teaching methods achieve not only a perceived increase in understanding, but also improved psycho-legal competence when externally assessed.

“Overall, very good and interesting sessions from knowledgeable speakers with good discussion”

“Very worthwhile and fills a gap in the normal teaching offerings!”

“Going through cases makes it more memorable”

“Very enjoyable and engaging. Also helpful to discuss contemporary issues relating to expert witness role as they came up e.g., bias, media coverage”