



# Professional supervision – Stage two findings of a mixed method study exploring UK sonographers' views



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## Background

Professional supervision is a process which may take place between two or more professionals to support discussion on clinical practice and develop critical analytical skills<sup>1</sup>. It should encompass critical discussion on clinical practice and involve discussion on the emotional wellbeing of the professional, with the opportunity to act as a mechanism for reflection on practice and continual learning<sup>2,3</sup>. Whilst professional supervision is discussed in the literature for other allied health professional groups, there is minimal research available for the use in sonography within the United Kingdom (UK)<sup>4</sup>. The Society of Radiographers and Health and Care Professions Council provide guidance on the use of professional supervision, but this is not a mandatory requirement to practice.

A two-stage mixed method study was conducted to explore UK sonographers' views on professional supervision. Stage two findings are reported here.

## Methods

Following ethical approval being granted, a series of online semi-structured focus groups and interviews were undertaken. Participants were identified following stage one of this study where participants of an online questionnaire provided their email address if they would like to participate in stage two of the study. Participants were then invited to participate in stage two focus groups and interviews.

Stage two participants were divided into the same four subgroups from stage one, so not to cause any power imbalance. The four subgroups (SG) included sonographers (SG1- 3 participants), clinical specialist and consultant sonographers (SG2- 1 participant), ultrasound managers (SG3- 3 participants) and professional body officers (SG4- 1 participant). Focus groups or interviews were conducted by an independent research assistant and recorded using Microsoft Teams. Transcripts were then analysed for themes by two researchers. Thematic analysis was undertaken using a reflexive process<sup>5</sup>.

## Results

Several key themes were identified from the findings of this study. The **definition and understanding** of professional supervision was noted as being significant with misunderstanding of what professional supervision was and how it worked as a separate process to any appraisal or preceptorship process.

*"I think I find it difficult to separate what is professional supervision from, say, your normal PDR or your normal one to one meetings that you might have with a manager say" P002 (SG1)*

*"there are other professions that are doing it, which I guess we could learn from" P016 (SG2)*

*"people's perception of what, what we mean by professional supervision varies enormously" P028 (SG4)*

**Barriers** to professional supervision were noted with time, workload and workplace demands being a strong theme.

*"We all say it is like a conveyor belt. They're, in one door out the other and .... there's no, there's so no respite at all" P004 (SG1)*

*"as a manager...I feel like I have to justify everything I do that...where it's actually for the benefit of my staff." P022 (SG3)*

*"we just don't have the flex in the service. We don't we don't have the capacity to be able to give people you know, the professionals the time to be able to go and have a cup of tea and a walk" P016 (SG2)*

*"I think time...you know is, is something that's extremely difficult to mark out at the moment within, within healthcare because everybody is so unrelentingly busy" P028 (SG4)*

The impact the professional supervision could have on **quality patient care** was identified as a potential positive benefit to implementation.

*"if you're a happier member of staff because you're feeling you're supported, then I think that comes across to patients as well." P001 (SG1)*

*"we seem to have forgotten that if we look after our staff, we don't need to worry about the patients because they'll look after them for us" P022 (SG3)*

The **emotional burden** that sonographers face and the impact that this has on sonographer **wellbeing** was identified across all subgroups

*"if they're not getting the support at work that they need and they can't go and talk to anyone else, then that's going to have an impact on their mental health, and they'll be off with, you know, illness, depression" P004 (SG1)*

Discussing moving from one patient to the next:  
*"they don't know that you've just told somebody that their baby's died. But that juxtaposition of absolutely breaking somebody's world to them being a bit annoyed 'cause you can't see whether it's a girl or a boy. It's really tough in obstetrics in particular." P016 (SG2)*

*"the team deal more now, with far more emotive situations than I certainly probably ever did as a student radiographer, and it's a busier place. It's, it's a, you know, crazy, crazy time, so you don't get that 10-minute breathing space necessarily" P023 (SG3)*

*"we have really difficult conversations with individuals that you know that are life changing for them and are very difficult." P028 (SG4)*

**Support** for sonographers was discussed across the subgroups, with the potential positive impact professional supervision could have identified as a positive impact.

*"there's quite a few of us who are the same level.... and so if we're struggling, we would probably go to each other" P001 (SG1)*

*"ultrasound is very isolating as well, isn't it? You're in your room with your patient" P002 (SG1)*

*"ultimately, if we don't give people the tools to deal with what they're going to have to deal with, ....you need to give them the tools to deal with it and build up resilience before they meet those problems and then to have the space to be able to talk about it afterwards" P022 (SG3)*

*".. professional supervision is also an opportunity to learn, ... to grow your knowledge and your understanding ... I think there is there is an element of support through this.... I don't think that's the primary aim of supervision. But I think there is definitely an element of, of emotional support that would come through it that, again it would enable hopefully people to, to retain that resilience" P028 (SG4)*

## Conclusion

This mixed-method study has provided valuable insights into the views of sonographers across difference levels of practice on the use of professional supervision. Professional supervision could have a positive impact on the sonographer role however there are potential barriers which could hinder its effectiveness.

Further research is required to assess what method of support would be most effective for sonographers ongoing development and wellbeing within the workplace.

## References

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