

Scope of Practice FAQs for Consumers

Psychologists

1. What do psychologists do?

Unlike psychiatrists who are medical doctors, psychologists are social scientists who provide direct patient care related to mental health, human behavior and thought processes. As health care providers, psychologists advise clients on dealing with everyday situations, help children with developmental and learning issues, and work with clients on behavior modification.

2. How are psychologists regulated?

Psychologists who provide patient care are licensed and/or certified in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. The specific licensing requirements vary based on specialty and state, but generally include a doctoral degree, a professional internship, 1 to 2 years of experience, and passage of a standardized examination. In most states, licensing and scope of practice regulations are enforced and administered by the state's Board of Psychological Examiners, or some variation thereof.

3. What is the scope of practice issue in psychology?

The primary scope of practice issue in psychology is whether appropriately trained psychologists should be allowed to prescribe psychotropic medications to their patients. Those who support prescriptive privileges for psychologists point out that psychologists undergo a post-graduate Master's program in order to be certified to prescribe, that the shortage of psychiatrists causes major problems with access to mental health care, and that psychologists are more knowledgeable about mental health illnesses than are primary care physicians who currently prescribe most of psychotropic medications. In addition, some argue that since psychologists' core education is not based on biomedical model of care, they will be less likely to overprescribe medications and will instead reserve medications for those occasions when they are really necessary. Opponents of prescriptive authority for psychologists argue that this would result in an increased risk to patients because, they contend, post-doctoral psychopharmacology programs do not adequately prepare psychologists to prescribe medications and to deal with all the side-effects and interactions involved.

4. How are psychologists trained?

Psychologists are required to obtain a doctoral degree (Ph.D. or Psy.D). In addition, psychologists who seek prescriptive privileges, in the states that allow psychologists to prescribe, must complete a 2-year post-doctorate Masters degree in psychopharmacology. This post-doctoral degree includes study in basic biological and anatomical sciences, neurosciences, physical assessments and lab exams, clinical medicine and pharmacology, psychopharmacology and professional ethical issues, as well as a supervised clinical experience applying learned skills and knowledge to treat patients under the guidance of a more experienced health care provider.

5. What evidence is there to demonstrate the ability of psychologists to prescribe safely?

Between 1991 and 1997 the Military Health System conducted a demonstration program sanctioned by Congress, where a group of 10 licensed psychologists were trained to incorporate the prescription of medications into their treatment of mental illnesses. The psychologists were then placed in the patient care settings within the Military Health System to provide care using their new

skills. The program was evaluated both internally by U.S. government agencies and by external researchers, and it was found to have produced positive outcomes, demonstrating that appropriately trained psychologists can provide safe, quality care and increase access to mental health services that involve the prescription of medications.

In addition, CAC found no evidence of compromised patient safety resulting from prescription of medications by properly trained psychologists in Louisiana or New Mexico, where prescriptive authority is part of a psychology's scope of practice. Therefore, CAC believes there is enough evidence to at a minimum justify states undertaking pilot studies and demonstration projects to explore the safety and desirability of allowing properly trained psychologists to prescribe medications as part of a mental health treatment regimen.

6. Which states give prescriptive privileges to psychologists?

Louisiana and New Mexico are the two states that currently allow appropriately trained, examined and licensed psychologists to prescribe medications for mental illnesses. In addition, Indiana allows psychologists who train or practice in programs sponsored by the federal government to prescribe medications. However, for a majority of residents of Indiana this makes no difference because they are not eligible to go to a federal government psychologist to get a prescription for their mental illness.

7. How do psychologists collaborate with primary care physicians in connection with prescribing medications?

In both Louisiana and New Mexico, the psychologists who prescribe medications are required to consult with or collaborate with the patient's primary care physician in selecting and monitoring a course of treatment involving the prescription of medications.

This publication was produced by Citizen Advocacy Center (CAC). For questions, comments and further information please contact CAC at davidswankin@cacenter.org.