Experiences of the TOC – An Assessor

Having spoken to three applicants for the TOC, we thought that it was time to get the views from the other side of the table on what people need to do to be successful, and so met with a TOC Assessor to get his views on what candidates for the test need to do to ensure they are successful.

Why did you want to become a TOC assessor?

Having had a long career as a chiropractor, I wanted to give something back to the profession, and I felt that the TOC assessor role was a really good fit with my skills and experience.

Why do you think that the format of the TOC needed to be changed?

The previous TOC had a fundamental flaw, as it wasn't a genuine test of competence. By asking candidates to carry out a number of procedures, we were able to check that they knew what to do, but we were not able to identify how they would do this in a practise situation or how they would relate to patients and to 'real life' situations.

By giving us the opportunity to explore with applicants how they have dealt with real situations that they have encountered in their career, we can get a much better understanding of how they would practise and any issues that they would need to address before practising in the UK.

What advice would you give to a chiropractor about to start the TOC? What should they do, and what shouldn't they do?

The key thing that you must do is to plan ahead. Applying for the TOC is going to take some time, to get the documents, complete the Evidence of Practice Questionnaire and prepare for the interview. You should pay particular attention to how long it may take you to get the documentation that you require.

You should also consider the examples that you give. Ensure that the examples you use are the best you have for each particular situation rather than the first one that comes to mind.

And finally, don't forget that it is all about the patient, and not the chiropractor. Ensure that your answers focus on the benefit to the patient, rather than just about what you did.

When you read an Evidence of Practice Questionnaire, what identifies someone as a good candidate?

Firstly, we don't use the Evidence of Practice Questionnaire to rank candidates or to identify who should and who shouldn't pass – when candidates walk into the interview, they all have the potential to pass and be allowed onto the register.

However, we use the Questionnaire to identify issues that we will raise with the candidate in the interview. If reading the form identifies a possible area of weakness, then we will quiz them on that area, so we can appreciate the level of understanding they have (or don't have) on that topic.

When you fill in the form, you should seek to reflect on your style of practise, explaining not just what you did, but why you did it. This will give us a good understanding of your knowledge of how chiropractic is practised in the UK, and your understanding of the COP and SOP.

It is also important to clarify that we are not seeking to assess the treatment you provided to the patient, per se. Even of something went seriously wrong with the treatment it doesn't mean that you will automatically fail - you do, however, need to be able to explain what went wrong, what you learnt from it and why you wouldn't do it again.

What common mistakes do candidates make when filling in the Evidence of Practice Questionnaire?

The most common mistake is candidates don't appreciate that the Questionnaire will be read by fellow chiropractors, and so they don't go into the level of detail that we are looking for.

There are also a number of other common mistakes made such as:-

- being unable to give a successful rationale for patient care and clinical performance
- weak diagnoses
- poor documentation
- poor case history (notes often only saying 'same as before' for example)
- poor understanding of the natural history of a condition

How much detail should candidates provide?

You should provide enough detail to give the panel confidence that you understand the action that you took and can reflect on why you took that particular course of action and any issues that arise.

Two common mistakes are that candidates often fail to provide any reflection on the action that they took or alternatively provide information that isn't required to hit the 2,000 word limit. You do not have to provide 2,000 word answers if you can answer the question with fewer words.

After submitting the paperwork, the next step for applicants is to be interviewed by a panel of chiropractors – how do you prepare for the interview?

The assessors receive the documentation several weeks before the interview. We each go through the documentation, and complete a pro forma for each answer that the candidate provides on the evidence to practice questionnaire.

The day before the interview, the assessors meet and decide what we are going to ask each candidate and what issue we are going to explore. We don't make any decision on the likelihood of a candidate passing or failing at this stage, instead just identify issues in the evidence of practice questionnaire that we need to explore in greater depth. We also use this time to decide who is going to ask which question, and ensure that we all understand what issues we are trying to explore with the candidate.

How do you identify what questions to ask candidates?

The questions that we ask is determined by the answers that you give on your Evidence of Practice Questionnaire. Expect us to ask proactive questions – 'what will you do' – rather than reactive questions about what you did.

What common mistakes do candidates make at the interview?

You can bring along any further information that you have received since submitting the documentation to the interview, and candidates have often regretted not being able to provide greater evidence or support to their answers by providing such documentation.

The other main common mistake that people make is that they don't listen fully to questions, and so don't actually answer the question that they have been asked.

Last but not least, many candidates are struck with nerves during the interview. That is understandable, but we really try to relax candidates and help them to give their best. So try not to get too nervous (easy to say from my side of the table, I know!) and if you do misunderstand a question, or want the panel to clarify something, please ask us for help – we don't bite!

What makes a candidate stand out at the interview?

The one thing that makes a candidate stand out is an ability to be objective in their answers . We don't mind if you did something wrong, or if you could have done something better, so long as you can show us that you understand why what you did wasn't successful and why you wouldn't do it again in that situation. When we ask why something went wrong, candidates will say "because that is what I was taught" or "that is what my boss makes me do" – that maybe the case, but we want to know why you wouldn't do it now.

Do assessors seek to support candidates through the process, or catch them out?

We very much want to support and help candidates. We do not try to catch candidates out, or ask unwarranted or unnecessarily difficult questions.

We want you to do your best, and all you have to do is demonstrate to us that you are safe to practice in the UK. If you can do that you will be fine – we don't have a set quota of candidates to fail or anything like that, so we try to ask questions that are as clear as possible, and if you don't understand the question or are confused about something, don't hesitate to ask for clarification.

If fact, you should view the interview very positively. We are not trying to catch you out, but to clarify any issues that we don't understand or are unsure of in your form, and the interview is your opportunity to address those concerns.