



First do no harm: the language of witness care in professional regulation fitness to practise proceedings in medicine and nursing.

Faculty of Wellbeing Education and Language Studies (WELs)

Call for full or part time doctoral projects starting in October 2026

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Project description

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Aim and Research Questions

The aim of this PhD is to investigate the ways healthcare professional regulators communicate with the public, professionals, and individuals and families involved in professional regulatory fitness to practise (Ftp) proceedings.

The PhD builds on the findings of a completed NIHR funded project which aimed to explore the experiences of public witnesses in fitness to practise hearings of the 13 UK statutory health and social care regulators engage with the public involved in investigations and as witnesses in public tribunal hearings.

(<https://wels.open.ac.uk/research/witness-harm-holding-account>), with on-going impact capture involving several regulators including those involved with nursing and medicine.

We found that communication by regulators with witnesses is highly important in promoting trust in regulators. We recommended that a compassion-focused, trauma informed approach is used in communications with people involved in fitness to practise hearings. This proposed new project is to specifically explore whether the content of communications reflects these principles when used by health professional regulators who are now implementing these new practices with the public and the registrants who become engaged with professional regulatory fitness to practise (FtP) proceedings.

While there is a body linguistics applied in the criminal law context, there are no studies using linguistic analyses in professional regulation. This PhD project will examine the communications of the regulator with the registrant, other professionals, the employer and the public/service users and their families involved in FtP proceedings in health care, with a particular focus on regulators that are introducing witness care improvement approaches. FtP has been shown by our research to be distressing for all of those involved particularly for those who have experienced harm by the misconduct of the registrant, and for whom engaging in the fitness to practise process can be re-traumatising.

Similarly, the experience of registrants who are involved in the FtP process can be very distressing and has been known to be associated with suicide. Some regulators are making specific efforts to take a trauma informed approach to and improving communications in witness care. The PhD will explore a completely novel area of research with the application of linguistic and qualitative social science expertise to the analysis of communications in various formats. These include regulators' public websites, the transcripts of cross examination of witnesses in tribunals and the text of the public determinations of hearings. There may also be opportunities to examine the specific emails and other text used to communicate with these participants during the fitness to practise process, depending upon agreements with the regulators.

The central aim of the PhD project is to develop a framework for the linguistic identification and analysis of trauma-informed approaches to communication in the context of fitness-to-practice hearings.

The PhD project builds on the findings of a highly impactful NIHR funded project (<https://wels.open.ac.uk/research/witness-harm-holding-account>) and the on-going impact capture supported by Open University funds with the 13 health and social care regulators in the UK and a new Open University funded project with the Nursing and Midwifery Board of Ireland.

The research follows directly from key recommendations of the completed NIHR project. Recommendations are about better witness care-including trauma informed practices in communications by regulators with those who raise regulatory concerns and those who are required to be witnesses (the registrant, other professionals, the employer and the public/service users are their

families). The General Medical Council, the Nursing and Midwifery Council (UK) and the Nursing and Midwifery Board of Ireland regulators have begun what is known to be a complex process to initiate and embed these new practices based on our prior research. The PhD project will offer opportunities to evaluate and compare these approaches,

Aims

To evaluate communication assessments and interventions by professional regulators aimed at improving the engagement and experience of (non-expert) witnesses; registrants (defendants) and employer witnesses, and those who have been harmed by the registrant (the public, colleagues). Produce recommendations and guides for trauma informed and compassionate communications in witness care for regulators.

Methodology

Proposed Project name: *First do no harm: The language of witness care in professional regulation fitness to practise proceedings in medicine and nursing regulation*

There are two core questions we expect to be addressed by the proposed PhD research, using corpus linguistics and text analysis, supported by other linguistic subdisciplines such as pragmatics and conversation analysis.

RQ1: How can the six components of trauma informed practices (TIP) be mapped onto a framework of features and linguistic behaviours that are both grounded in linguistic theory, and are amenable to automated extraction and identification?

RQ2: Does the linguistic framework developed for the identification of TIP show that the language used in written and audio communications of regulators using a trauma informed approach differs from that used prior to the introduction of trauma informed practices

RQ3 How could the language associated with FTP procedures be further modified to maximise trauma-informed practices and compassion in witness care?

RQ4 What recommendations for regulator communications and good practice guides can be derived from this analysis?

We propose in the PhD to use linguistic analyses of the content of written and recorded communications. In particular, the student will be expected to use corpus linguistics methods to explore both formal and functional characteristics of the data. There will be a focus on lexical and phrasal features (including parts of speech, repeated structures, stance markers, analysis of word frequency and contexts of use); syntactic features (including sentence types, use of modal verbs, hedging and boosters); and a broader analysis of the pragmatics and discourse aspects of the data. We expect the automated data extraction and quantification to be combined by human interpretation and contextualised analysis of the results, to relate the quantitative findings to the wider interactional and professional exchanges in which they occur and the broader context of the project itself.

Proposed Activity 1

Using corpus linguistic methods and thematic analysis (Bingham, 2023) to analyse content of public facing FtP documents for those raising concerns or

subject to investigation, (non-expert) witnesses (registrants, colleagues, employers and public) communications about witness statements and hearings from websites, template letters, e mails. Templates will be compared from a baseline identified by each of the regulators as being before changes were initiated and compared to those in place after embedding the communication intervention.

Proposed Activity 2

Apply corpus linguistic methods and conversation analysis to spoken words, (i) to recordings of phone calls from selected harm cases, e.g. raising a concern, taking a witness statement, preparing for hearings with regulators, and witness cross examination where regulator systems permit (subject to data sharing agreements), (ii) analyse hearing transcriptions of (non-expert) witness cross examination, with a particular emphasis on hearings involving serious harm and/or sexual allegations.

Proposed Activity 3

Develop recommendations and good practice examples for regulators, evaluating these for feasibility and acceptability through interviews with regulators

Contribution

This PhD project will contribute to research in linguistics and in health and social care. The linguistic research underpinning it will advance our understanding of practical applications of corpus linguistics and pragmatics, showing how they

can support impactful developments in highly sensitive settings such as FtP hearings. The creation of a linguistic framework representing the core principles of TIP will lead to an easily applicable resource that can be used to evaluate sensitive communications across a range of contexts. Uptake and use of the guidance and good practice exemplars by regulators could improve witness care. It will also provide an accessible way for regulators and practitioners to evaluate their own communicative practices and assess progress against stated goals.

Website

<https://wels.open.ac.uk/research/witness-harm-holding-account>

References

Bingham, A.J. (2023) 'From Data Management to Actionable Findings: A Five-Phase Process of Qualitative Data Analysis', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 22. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069231183620>.

