



Advice on Delegation of Tasks in Departments of Clinical Radiology

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1 Introduction

There has been an inexorable increase in demand for radiological services, which has not been met by a commensurate increase in radiologist manpower¹. This has placed considerable strain on Departments of Clinical Radiology. Some departments have responded by delegating some tasks. The Royal College of Radiologists supports proper delegation²⁻⁴, and the overriding requirement is that the benefits of delegation are achieved without exposing the patient to unreasonable risk⁴. Whenever a doctor delegates a medical task then the patient must be made aware both of the name of the responsible doctor and of the status of the person undertaking the delegated task⁵. This document considers questions of delegation from three points of view:

- professional responsibilities;
- legal responsibilities;
- management issues.

2 Delegation Issues

2.1 Professional responsibilities

2.1.1 The General Medical Council (GMC) has provided clear guidance for doctors regarding delegation in its booklet *Good Medical Practice*⁶.

- You may delegate medical care to nurses and other health care staff who are not registered medical practitioners if you believe it is best for the patient. But you must be sure that the person to whom you delegate is competent to undertake the procedure or therapy involved. When delegating care or treatment, you must always pass on enough information about the patient and the treatment needed. You will still be responsible for managing the patient's care.
- You must not enable anyone who is not registered with the GMC to carry out tasks that require the knowledge and skills of a doctor.

2.1.2 In *Röntgen's Progress*³ the College described how to plan, agree and monitor a delegated task. The person undertaking the task takes responsibility for the proper professional performance of that task, and also retains full responsibility for the care of the patient.

2.1.3 A radiologist may accept a request for an imaging investigation from a non-medically qualified health practitioner if the request is in the best interest of the patient⁷. The GMC has advised that provided the request is from a person whose ability is known personally to the radiologist, and provided the radiologist has formed the opinion that he is acting in the interest of the patient, then the radiologist will be able to defend himself against criticism of such action⁸.

2.2 Legal responsibilities

2.2.1 When delegating a task within the purview of the regulations, it remains the radiologist's responsibility to ensure that each task is undertaken within the law. As the person clinically directing an examination using ionising radiation, the radiologist has responsibilities under the Ionising Radiations Regulations⁹ and the POPUMET Regulations¹⁰. These require, inter alia, that a request to irradiate a patient be refused unless the radiologist regards the request to be clinically justified. The National Radiological Protection Board¹¹ has been explicit when stating that "radiologists should exercise clinical direction by establishing clear criteria for accepting or rejecting x ray referrals".

2.3 Management issues

2.3.1 The College has addressed the issues relating to the risks and benefits of any proposal to delegate in its document *Risk Management in Clinical Radiology*¹². Such an arrangement needs to be formalised under a tripartite agreement. The responsible radiologist shares management responsibility for the proper performance of the task not only with the trained person to whom the task is delegated but also with that person's employer.

3 Discussion and Examples

3.1 Radiologists are encouraged to delegate, subject to the guidance given, but the radiologist retains full clinical and managerial responsibility for the task. He or she should only delegate if he or

she is satisfied that the best interests of the patient are being served and that the task is formally and actually within the ability of the member of staff to whom the task is delegated.

3.2 If delegation occurs improperly the radiologist concerned may be held responsible.

Circumstances when delegation would be inappropriate may include:

- when it has proved impractical to provide suitable training;
- when the risks to patient safety are too high;
- when delegation results in a reduction in the standard of care;
- when the degree of supervision is so great that delegation is superfluous;
- when delegation interferes seriously with the training of junior doctors

3.3 Examples

3.3.1 A referring doctor plans to delegate requests for radiological examinations to a nurse or nurses. The referring doctor retains responsibility for all such requests. The radiologist may accept the request only if he or she agrees that it is clinically justified. Protocols that define the circumstances in which delegation is appropriate will anticipate and overcome many of the potential problems. The Trust managers must endorse any such scheme.

3.3.2 A radiographer is to issue reports on imaging examinations. This aspect of delegation remains contentious. Detailed guidance on the subject has been given by the College¹³. However, when delegating to a radiographer, the individual must be willing and able to undertake the task. The radiographer must have appropriate training. A clinical radiologist must monitor the scheme and remains fully responsible for all aspects of the work delivered. The Trust managers must endorse the scheme.

3.3.3 A Clinical Director, in his or her role as a manager, is required by a more senior manager to implement a scheme which involves delegation; however, the Clinical Director as a doctor cannot support the scheme for sound professional reasons. The Clinical Director should not implement the scheme, and in some circumstances the dilemma could represent a proper reason for resigning from the management post.

4 Conclusion

The interests of the patient are paramount. The risk and benefit analysis of a delegation policy must be clearly in favour of the initiative. The referring doctor and the responsible radiologist must retain responsibility throughout the delegation process. The Trust managers must be a party to any scheme involving delegation.

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