**Frequently Asked Questions**

**Q1. Who are you?**

The ISU is a unit within the Institute of Clinical Sciences at University of Birmingham. We offer training to health professionals in all aspects of communication (e.g. interaction with patients, interaction with professional colleagues, interactive management and leadership, job-interview skills, oral presentation skills, academic writing and many other areas). We work, in the West Midlands and beyond, principally with postgraduate groups of hospital doctors and GPs, but also with dentists, nurses, reception staff, managers and pharmacists. The team itself has expertise in a wide range of areas as you will see from elsewhere on this website.

**Q2. How many health professionals have you seen on this programme?**

Over the years, around 250. Most of these have been doctors, typically at a training grade: a smaller number have been dentists.

**Q3. What areas can you help with?**

Health professionals get referred because they are perceived to need support in a very wide range of non-clinical areas. These include:

1. doctor-patient communication
2. communication with colleagues
3. leadership/interactive management
4. live exams and job interviews
5. English language
6. oral presentations

As regards iv) note that we do not ‘coach’ people for exams – it isn’t part of our remit to get people through exams they don’t deserve to pass! However, we can help health professionals to interact better with examiners and interviewers, and to manage performance anxiety.

Of the categories above, a perceived difficulty communicating with colleagues is probably the most frequently cited issue. Sometimes health professionals are seen as, e.g., too abrupt or too long-winded, too forceful or too diffident, etc., etc.

It’s worth adding that health professionals in difficulty sometimes face multiple problems, some directly relevant and some not. A doctor whose clinics overrun by 50%, for example, may have an apparent communication problem (can’t elicit information concisely), but this may be caused by anxiety (a need to check everything three times), which may reflect a lack of confidence and may spill over into the health professional’s private life (“my wife’s getting sick to death of me bringing my problems home . . .”) – and so on. We always aim to treat the individual health professional as a person, holistically with respect and sympathy.

**Q4. Who do you accept referrals from?**

The referring agent is normally the Professional Support Unit (PSU) at Health Education England (West Midlands), or the health professional him/herself. The trigger for a PSU referral is likely to be an unsatisfactory report from an educational supervisor, based on poor results in a 360° appraisal, or an APR, or on patient complaints: or, in a few cases, because training in a relevant area is a GMC/GDC requirement.

**Q5. I’m worried I may not be a competent communicator. How do I refer myself?**

If you’re working in the West Midlands, and at a training grade, it may be worth discussing with your educational supervisor whether you might be a suitable referral through the PSU. This means that the cost of ISU support would be borne by the PSU.

The training is not cheap, because we always work on an individual basis. There will be just you and an ISU facilitator, with or without a role player; and there will be, normally 6-9 hours of meetings, spread over 3-12 months. The cost is likely to be up to £1,500. We will discuss this with you before we start. We can usually make a substantial difference: but if we feel that we cannot, we will advise you of this at the outset.

**We encourage self-referrals, and hope that others involved in your education would view them positively. Having the ability to recognise an area that needs development and the willingness to be proactive and seek training says a great deal about you.**

**Q6. “I can’t allow huge amounts of time …how long will it take?”**

The training takes as long as we recommend, but we’re conscious of your time, and (if you’re a self referral in particular) of the expense involved. You can probably expect to meet with ISU staff for a maximum of 6-9 hours, spread over three days, over a 3 month period (we often also suggest a review after 12 months).

**Q7. “How likely is it that training of the kind arranged will develop my level of competence?”**

It is very likely.

**Q8. “One issue I have is that I feel I’m being unreasonably treated by my superior – how will training help?”**

It won’t: but feel free to talk about this in confidence – if we can agree a way of helping you to solve difficulties at this level, we will do so. By agreement, comments of this sort may be excluded from the written report.

**Q9. “I’ve never done role-play – what’s it like?”**

Role-play is an interactive experience in which all that you need to do is be yourself. Your role-player will undertake to present an accurate and real patient or fellow colleague who will offer an appropriate and agreed simulation to challenge you in a safe and supportive environment. Each role-play is followed by an oral feedback session to which your contribution is not only very welcome, but essential for reinforcing the learning experience.

**Q10. “Will role-play work? I’m pretty sure it won’t”**

Many people feel this way before undertaking a role-play session. Our experience shows that role-play works very well indeed. We have received very positive feedback from participants over a variety of ISU programmes. If you have any further doubts or concerns, please feel free to contact us.

**Q11. “Do you use video, and if so, what happens to the recording?”**

Video equipment is available and in some cases its use can be enormously valuable during the feedback following a role-play session to illustrate particular communication skills. We use it occasionally, therefore, but not always. The recording will be handed to you on a memory stick at the end of the session for your own use.

**Q12. “What will the report say?”**

We can’t promise a good report, but we promise it will be based on a sympathetic understanding, and will include detailed, practical suggestions.

**Q13. Where do the meetings take place?**

Normally on the University of Birmingham campus, but never in the Medical School itself. Occasionally, with appropriate permissions and consent (and with the agreement of the health professional) we visit the health professional’s workplace.