

Expanding Your Practice Into Forensic Work

In the late '90s, I went through two transitions. The first was law school, which I started in '97, and the second had to do with forensic practice. Between the late '70s, when I realized that my clinical practice was strong and satisfying, until the late '80s, when I grew increasingly resentful of the incursion of managed care into the mental health system (I trained to be a “professional” – not “labor”), I was very happy in my work as a treater. I had little contact with the forensic world and that was actually quite ok with me, as the hassles of dealing with the adversarial world of forensics seemed too much to pull me in that direction.

As I went through law school and thought about the kinds of legal work I might do on graduation, one area of interest was forensics, as I thought I might need to retain forensic specialists to work as experts on my legal cases. I realized that the world of forensics seemed to be growing exponentially while my attentions were elsewhere, so I decided to travel to San Diego for a weekend workshop series offered by the American Board of Forensic Psychology (ABFP).

That weekend blew my mind away. First, I ran into people I had known years earlier when I was a full time faculty member at USC. Those were wonderful reunions. Second, I felt like I walked into a time warp. The presenters and attendees were speaking an “ancient” language – one I hadn't heard spoken in many years – I had learned it as a graduate student at Indiana University back in the mid-60s. It was the language of empirical psychology, These folks spoke it, lived it and breathed it. I was transported 30 years into the past. And, with all due respect, I became aware that the attitudes of academic clinical psychologists I encountered in my training (often less-than-subtle snobbery, devaluing of practicing clinicians) were manifest among those who populated the forensic world,

As I tried to digest what I was seeing/hearing, I began to realize that forensics had developed along its own path, separating inexorably and irreversibly from the clinical path.

If we now fast-forward into my post-law school years, I found that my involvement with the forensic world became more evolved and complex. While I was (and continue to be) engaging forensic experts in the context of my legal cases, I also began to do a great deal of continuing education for mental health professionals, both in law/ethics/regulation and in trauma. As I became increasingly experienced in both of these arenas, I was contacted by other attorneys who wanted consultation and/or expert witness work in both of these arenas. I thus became, in part, a forensic practitioner, winding up with board certification by ABFP.

As I did more “standard of care” and trauma work in the forensic world, I came to realize that, especially with economic downturns and managed care

problems (how many of you managed care providers have had raises in your hourly rates in the past 10 years?), increasing numbers of treaters began to move toward forensic practice. I also realized that, while there are plenty of “courses” and “workshops” of great quality available for treaters to attend and learn, the biggest gap for treaters who want to develop forensic practices lies in supervised professional experience.

The forensic enterprise is fundamentally a solitary enterprise (just as clinical work tends to be), and obtaining supervised experience doing forensic work can be next-to-impossible for those who have been in clinical practice and wish to expand their work into forensics. I’m aware that there are child custody groups – panels – that sometimes offer newcomers supervised experience, but the forensic world is a great deal broader than custody (thank The Force) and there are precious few opportunities for supervised experience in non-custody areas. (I should quickly indicate that those practitioners who take positions in forensically-oriented institutions – hospitals, prisons, etc. – can get training in those institutions, but the group I’m focused on here are those who are in full time clinical practice and want to expand their practices to include forensic work).

So, I ask you: if you are one of those clinicians who wants to expand into forensic work, and if SFG were to offer you programs for ongoing consultation, be they formal courses, regularly meeting podcasts in which you can interact with faculty and/or one-to-one or small group consultation via the internet, would you be interested? Let us know. We want to help you but need to know that you’re there and are interested in this kind of educational experience.

Thanks,

Steve