

Guidance for assessors and candidates for APIL Accredited Spinal Cord Injury Specialist

1. Introduction

Accredited Spinal Cord Injury Specialist is a personal accreditation status awarded by the Association of Personal Injury Lawyers. To be eligible to apply, a candidate must have achieved Senior Litigator status. The requirements are not free standing, they are additional to those for Senior Litigator, and accreditation depends on satisfying the general Senior Litigator Standard.

In general, the guidance for assessors of candidates for Senior Litigator status applies to assessors of candidates for Accredited Spinal Cord Injury Specialist status.

Where assessment takes place wholly within the firm, it should be integrated with the normal supervision and management of a fee earner. There is not a separate assessment process, nor is there a requirement to assemble further evidence over and above completion of the Portfolio. Evidence of competent performance will come from the day to day work of the candidate.

Where an external assessor is appointed, all of the evidence required will still come from the files on which the candidate has worked, and from discussion with the candidate. Candidates should contact APIL to arrange an external assessor if required.

2. Who can be an assessor?

Once the accreditation scheme for spinal cord injury specialists is fully established, with a reasonable number of persons having been accredited, it will be the intention of APIL that assessors should be persons who have themselves held accreditation for at least five years.

For the time being, a person wishing to act as an assessor must hold Senior Litigator status, must have at least 5 years' personal experience of spinal cord injury cases since acquiring Senior Litigator status, and must be approved to act as an assessor by APIL. In approving persons to act as assessors APIL will wish to be satisfied that the person undertakes a sufficient number of spinal cord injury cases, and has experience of a sufficient range of cases to be able to properly assess the knowledge and understanding of candidates.

In a firm with a substantial spinal cord injury practice it will be possible for an assessor to be found from within the firm. Where an internal assessor is used, the assessor should usually be responsible for supervising the work of the candidate.

However, APIL recognises that in some firms there will be a single spinal cord injury specialist. In such cases application may be made to APIL for an external assessor to be appointed. If an external assessor is appointed, he or she will be an existing Accredited Spinal Cord Injury Specialist of at least five years standing, or a person recognised by APIL as having comparable competence and experience, as set out in ii) above.

3. Evidence of competent performance

WHERE TO FIND EVIDENCE

The Standard sets out the functions involved in progressing a spinal cord injury claim which are additional to the functions covered by the Senior Litigator Standard. The primary evidence that a candidate has undertaken each function successfully will come from the files for which they are

responsible. The steps taken in progressing the matter should be self-evident from the file, in the form of attendance notes, correspondence, etc. It is because the evidence is largely on these files that no separate collection of evidence needs to be maintained.

Although the underlying procedures are substantially common for both mainstream personal injury and spinal cord injury matters, it is important that a candidate should be able to demonstrate substantial experience of spinal cord injury cases. There is no absolute number of cases which a person should have concluded before applying for Accredited Spinal Cord Injury Specialist status, as comparable experience may have been gained from a smaller number of large cases, as from a larger number of smaller cases. However, it is likely that a successful candidate will have personally concluded:

- At least 10 spinal cord injury cases, of which
- At least 5 have been acting for a claimant who has tetraplegia

It is expected that over the three years prior to seeking accreditation a candidate will have averaged at least 8 hours per year of APIL accredited CPD on spinal cord injury matters.

It is likely that a successful candidate will also play an active part in spinal cord injury groups such as the Spinal Injuries Association or ASPIRE, as a means of maintaining professional contacts in the field, and of contributing to the work of such organisations.

Evidence of effective performance should arise naturally from the work of the candidate, and supervision of that work by the assessor. Where assessment is carried out within the firm, evidence will almost always come from a candidate being assessed in the normal course of their work. In relation to each function, you need to be satisfied that the candidate has carried it out, has done so properly, and has done so consistently. Remember that the performance you are looking for is performance which would give you the confidence to entrust the candidate with the power to be self-authorising at key stages in litigation, in respect of their own cases, and to be able to authorise others at those stages. This means that you are looking for more than a single example that a function has been properly undertaken, you are looking for consistent performance over a period of time, preferably over a range of types of case, and in a sufficient number of cases to make it likely that most of the problems and challenges which can arise have been encountered and dealt with.

Opportunities for evidence to arise include the general discussion of the progress of cases that is a normal part of the relationship between fee earner and supervisor; from formal reviews of files, either at key stages of litigation or through random file review; from annual or other appraisal of performance; and from observation of how the fee earner manages the relationships involved in progressing a case. An assessor might wish to observe the candidate conducting a client interview, conference with counsel, case management conference or meeting with experts. Opportunities for this might arise in relation to the more complex cases in which a supervisor might expect to have such an involvement anyway.

Where an external assessor is used, the assessor will review, with the candidate, a sample of current and completed files. The number of files to be reviewed will depend on the size and complexity of the cases handled, but it is unlikely that fewer than 6 files would be reviewed in detail. The assessor will discuss with the candidate the handling of the matters, and the reasons for the decisions taken at key stages. The purpose of this is not to second guess decisions taken, but to establish that the candidate has the knowledge, understanding and know-how necessary to evaluate properly all of the available options at each stage of the case. If an external assessor judges that a candidate has not yet fully satisfied the requirements of the Standard, he or she may identify matters requiring further attention, and agree with the candidate a date by which it would be reasonable to arrange a further assessment meeting.

ADDITIONAL ASSESSMENT AGAINST SENIOR LITIGATOR STANDARD

Whilst knowledge and understanding are assessed as a part of a holistic appraisal of performance against individual Standards, it may help assessors and candidates to keep a note of cases where relevant knowledge and understanding was demonstrated, or relevant training events attended. The Outcomes of Effective Performance section of the Portfolio enables this to be done.

The assessment guidance for Senior Litigator status allows candidates to satisfy the requirements for a small number of the competences by providing evidence of having undertaken relevant training, without having direct experience of cases involving the competence in question.

A candidate for Accredited Spinal Cord Injury Specialist **must** meet this Standard, by reference to having handled a sufficient number of cases to demonstrate knowledge and understanding gained through direct experience.

If, in gaining Senior Litigator status, the candidate satisfied a competence through attendance at training events only, they must now demonstrate direct experience of the competence when acting for clients.

KNOWLEDGE, UNDERSTANDING AND KNOW-HOW

You need to be satisfied not only that the function has been undertaken, but that it was done properly. It is important to ensure that the candidate understood what they were doing and why, and did not just happen to do the right thing by luck. You can establish this by discussing the case with the candidate, and questioning them as to why they took, or propose to take, a particular course of action. This is no different to the discussion you would expect to have anyway with a fee earner when discussing a case with them, or reviewing one of their files. This type of questioning allows you to satisfy yourself that the candidate has the necessary knowledge, understanding and know-how to enable them to operate properly, and to deal with the unusual or unexpected.

Knowledge, understanding and know-how are particularly important in assessing candidates. The number of technical requirements which are additional to those for Senior Litigator is relatively small, but the additional understanding needed to handle these specialist cases, and the additional knowledge of both law and medical matters is substantial. Discussion of files, and questioning of the candidate, is at the heart of the assessment.

4. Satisfying the Standard

In relation to the application of the Senior Litigator Standards to spinal cord injury matters, and the additional matters dealt with in the Accredited Spinal Cord Injury Specialist Standard, the assessor should ask themselves:

- ***Do I have evidence that the candidate has carried out all of the additional functions covered by the Accredited Spinal Cord Injury Specialist Standard satisfactorily, in relation to a reasonable number and range of cases?***
- ***Do I have evidence that the candidate has carried out all of the functions covered by the Senior Litigator Standard satisfactorily, in relation to a reasonable number and range of spinal cord injury cases?***

- ***Would I be content for the candidate to perform these functions unsupervised, in relation to spinal cord injury matters?***
- ***Would I be content for the candidate to supervise and guide other fee earners undertaking these functions in spinal cord injury matters?***
- ***Would I be content for the candidate to be self-authorising at any key stage of spinal cord injury litigation?***
- ***Would I be content for the candidate to authorise other fee earners to proceed at any key stages of spinal cord injury litigation?***

If the answer to any of these questions is “no”, then the candidate is not yet fully competent. Further experience will be required, together with training, mentoring or guidance on carrying out the functions in questions, before a further assessment is made.

If the answer to all of these questions is “yes”, then the assessor can certify the candidate as competent in relation to the Standard.

There is no separate assessment of possession of knowledge and understanding, or of know-how. A person who lacked the necessary knowledge, understanding or know-how would be unable to carry out many of the listed functions satisfactorily. A weakness in knowledge, understanding or know-how might lead an assessor to the conclusion that they did not have evidence that the candidate had carried out the functions satisfactorily, or that they would not be willing to allow the candidate to work unsupervised. In that event, the candidate should be advised of the shortcoming, and it should be addressed through a training plan.

5. Using the Portfolio

Assessors should keep a record of the candidate’s progress. This can be done by completing the assessor’s part of the Outcomes of Effective Performance section of the Portfolio.

If you feel that a case handled by the candidate provides evidence that an element of the Standard has been fully met you should enter what you did to ascertain this (e.g. “reviewed file”, “discussed case”, “observed client interview”), the date and your initials. The Outcomes of Effective Performance section then enables you to:

- Identify any elements of the Standard in which evidence is lacking, enabling you then to allocate to the candidate cases which would provide the opportunity for competence to be demonstrated;
- Facilitate eventual completion of the Portfolio, which must be submitted to APIL when formal application for Accredited Spinal Cord Injury Specialist status is made;
- Pass on the record of the evidence you have assessed, should you cease to be the candidate’s supervisor;
- Have a record of your assessment decisions on file, should the decision in respect of your candidate be one of those reviewed as a part of the APIL quality assurance procedure.

No record beyond the Portfolio is needed as, if properly completed, it will point to where evidence exists on file. Where you have been satisfied, from your own observation (for example, of a client interview in relation to Unit 1), that an element of the Standard is satisfied, your comments in the Outcomes of Effective Performance section will be taken as conclusive evidence.

For reasons of client confidentiality the first column (cases providing evidence) should be anonymised before submitting a copy of the Portfolio to APIL, by deleting the case names or deleting the columns electronically. A copy of the original Portfolio must be retained by the firm.

6. Quality assuring assessment decisions

APIL will review a sample of assessment decisions, to ensure that the personal accreditation scheme remains credible. The review will usually consist of reviewing with the assessor the evidence on which they relied in making their judgements, making use of the Portfolio copy retained in-house. For this purpose, copies of Portfolios should be retained by the firm for a period of five years following the submission of the application for Accredited Spinal Cord Injury Specialist status. In common with all retrospective reviews of assessment decisions, this is a review of the assessment made, not of the candidate.