

Interim Guidance for Undertaking Forensic Psychological Assessments in the Era of COVID-19

Issued by the APS College of Forensic Psychologists

In this unprecedented era of social distancing due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the CFP is keen to support members in continuing to strive towards best practice in completing forensic evaluations. The following are interim guidelines for all members. It is intended that this document be used to guide members' practice, and also to support members in advising referrers of the parameters and limitations of different platforms.

- It is the position of the CFP that best practice in undertaking forensic psychological evaluations is that they are conducted in-person. This should always be the first option considered.
- Where in-person evaluations cannot be undertaken for health, safety, or other extenuating practical reasons, evaluation via videoconferencing is the next best option. It is not, however, considered best practice, as it will place additional limitations and restrictions on the evaluation, and therefore opinions provided.
- All psychological evaluations need to be completed while adhering to the APS Code of Ethics and relevant guidelines.
- Videoconferencing must be conducted via an appropriately secure platform (see '[Overview of security and privacy of videoconferencing platforms](#)' prepared by the Centre for Online Health at the University of Queensland for the APS, and published on the APS website).
- Informed consent should be explained to the examinee in the usual manner when undertaking evaluations via videoconferencing, including outlining limitations of undertaking the assessment via videoconferencing, and the potential implications of agreeing and disagreeing to continue. Wherever possible, informed consent should be given in writing rather than verbally. If written consent cannot be gained, psychologists will need to appropriately document the consent process in their notes. It should be clearly stated to the examinee if the assessment is being recorded or not, and this should be documented.
- Psychological testing for high stakes scenarios requires the administration is proctored to ensure integrity of the testing procedure. Some psychological tests can be administered remotely involving screen share in some videoconference apps and enabling the examinee control of the screen so that the completion of the testing can be supervised. Test publishers have made modifications to some testing materials to enable use of their tests for remote administration. Any deviations from the standardised administration, however, need to be considered prior to interpretation of test results.

- When completing remote evaluations or interventions with examinees via videoconferencing, the psychologist needs to ensure that the examinee is safe to talk and that they do not have concerns regarding spyware (e.g., in family law due to stalking), and are not in breach of bail conditions for example.
- The limitations of videoconferencing should be clearly outlined to the referrer in advance, including what psychometric testing can and cannot be undertaken via videoconferencing, and any other limitations, including potential difficulties establishing rapport, limitations to observations of examinees' presentation, and problems with conducting rigorous forensic risk assessment.
- In line with recommendations made by the American Psychological Association (APA) and the APS, Members are reminded that most psychological test instruments and other assessment procedures were designed and developed for in-person administration. When a psychological test or other assessment procedure is conducted remotely, psychologists are encouraged to ensure that the integrity of the psychometric properties of the test or assessment procedure (e.g. reliability and validity) and conditions of administration indicated in the test manual are preserved when adapted for use with such technologies (see Guidelines for the practice of telepsychology- American Psychological Association and <https://www.apa.org/practice/guidelines/telepsychology> and the APS [Online psychological testing brief guide](#)).
- The final psychological report should reference the manner in which the evaluation was undertaken, and clearly explain the limitations due to videoconferencing.
- A generic statement of what psychologists could include in their reports as an account of the informed consent process is outlined below:
 - **Due to social distancing restrictions as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, this evaluation was conducted via videoconferencing on a secure platform that complies with current guidance issued by the Australian Psychological Society. The limits of confidentiality were discussed, and *Examinee's Name* voluntarily consented to the examination on this basis and under these conditions.**
- If videoconferencing is unavailable, the final option is to undertake a preliminary or initial telephone assessment. This is not endorsed by the CFP and should constitute a last resort in exceptional circumstances only. The limitations of telephone assessments are multiple, including inability to observe examinees' behaviour and presentation, which is of course a key factor in undertaking evaluations where issues such as secondary gain must be considered, as well as issues undertaking any testing. It is suggested that in reports for forensic evaluations

conducted via telephone, psychologists indicate they are unable to offer firm conclusions and opinions and include a recommendation that a comprehensive in-person evaluation should be conducted when possible (e.g. social distancing constraints are lifted). If the psychologist does not believe a valid evaluation can be completed via telephone, the referrer should be advised of such, and the psychologist should feel confident to decline the referral.

- Once the current social distancing measures have been lifted, the CFP is keen to support members in ensuring videoconferencing does not become a replacement for in-person assessments. As stated at the outset of this guidance, an in-person examination is considered best practice in conducting forensic psychological assessments. It is imperative that the field of Forensic Psychology uphold best practice standards in order to fulfil our duty to provide impartial and scientifically grounded reports to courts and other tribunals.