

Statutory regulation: why all echocardiographers should be registered

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Performed at the patient's bedside and without exposure to ionising radiation, transthoracic echocardiography (TTE) is considered a minimal-risk procedure that provides rapid access to a comprehensive investigation of cardiac structure and function that is key to diagnosing heart disease and greatly affects patient management. Echocardiography is a continually evolving science, however, and as ultrasound technologies advance and our diagnostic capabilities become greater, training and ongoing professional development must also evolve to ensure that echocardiographers remain up-to-date and competent. Consequently, correct and accurate diagnoses and implementation of appropriate patient management plans frequently hinge on the findings of TTE, highlighting the great responsibility held by echocardiographers. It is for these reasons that statutory regulation of cardiac physiologists has been under discussion for many years.

What is statutory regulation?

Statutory regulation refers to health and care professions that, by law, must be registered with a professional regulatory body in order to practice.¹ It stipulates requirements for training and competence and outlines the ethical standards for individuals practising within the profession. The titles used by regulated professionals are legally protected, meaning it is a criminal offence for an individual to use a title they are not entitled to. By ensuring individuals practising within a profession are suitably qualified and adhere to professional ethical standards, statutory regulation provides a mechanism to ensure public safety and to prevent harm in the provision of health and social care services.²

What are the benefits to patients?

By stipulating the necessary education, training, and competency standards that must be achieved in order to maintain registration, regulation promotes **continuous professional development**, encourages **consistency and uniformity** across the healthcare sector, and guarantees that **high standards** of safe and effective clinical care are provided by regulated individuals. Establishing these mandatory requirements and outlining the ethical standards for practice, with a clear and formal complaints process, facilitates **professional accountability**. This means that registered professionals can be held accountable for malpractice or substandard care by the regulatory bodies that monitor and enforce these standards. It is this process of regulatory oversight and the ability to remove from practice the very few individuals whose practice falls below the expected standards that **protects patients** and **enhances public confidence** in the profession. Patient care and safety is clearly at the root of all regulatory processes in health care. However, there are also important benefits for the regulated workforce.

What are the benefits to regulated individuals?

The training to become an echocardiographer is a long process. At the very least, echocardiographers from a cardiac physiology background complete undergraduate study in a science-based degree, before progressing onto a two to three year training programme in echocardiography. Achieving BSE

Level 2 accreditation is a significant undertaking, equivalent to MSc level study, and demonstrates extensive clinical knowledge of the very broad spectrum of cardiac pathology. By developing this high-level of knowledge, a BSE accredited echocardiographer is suitably trained and qualified to investigate the complex and very broad range of pathologies that are encountered on a daily basis, including: inherited cardiac conditions, complex heart valve disease, the broad spectrum of heart failure, pericardial disease, congenital heart disease, and everything in-between.

Highly skilled echocardiographers hold the privileged position of being the diagnosticians at the gateway to essential management plans. However, the emergence of artificial intelligence (AI) platforms into research programmes has led to recommendations that healthcare individuals with just weeks of training are capable of acquiring echocardiographic images that can be interpreted by AI systems; in some cases, this has been implemented into clinical practice. While these practices have been recommended to alleviate pressures on established echocardiography services and to expedite diagnoses, they do not provide the governance, safety, or high standards of care that qualified echocardiographers do. Although the risk that these processes pose to patients is clear to us as echocardiographers, the perceived cost and time-saving benefits are appealing to some NHS decision-makers who are not familiar with echocardiography services. However, performance of 'AI assisted' echocardiography by individuals with no formal training creates significant risks not just for patients, but also for the highly trained workforce who are replaced by cheaper and unqualified individuals.

AI will eventually offer great benefits to many aspects of echocardiography services, but only if it is developed around a highly skilled and qualified workforce. By stipulating the necessary standards required for education, training, and competence, statutory regulation protects the workforce from cheaper and unsafe practices that may be appealing to service leaders.

Why isn't BSE a regulatory body?

The Professional Standards Authority (PSA) is an independent

organisation accountable to Parliament and informs the Health and Social Care Committee. Established by legislation in 2001, the PSA's mandate is to protect the public by enhancing the regulation and registration of individuals working in health and care sectors. By improving regulation and registration, the PSA ensures higher standards and better protection for the public.

The British Society of Echocardiography (BSE) is an accrediting society that maintains a list of accredited members. However, it is crucial to distinguish this from being on a register accredited by the PSA or one of the ten national regulators overseen by the PSA. Recognised registers and regulators uphold important standards in areas such as public protection, complaints handling, governance, setting standards for registrants, education and training, and managing the register.

A voluntary register differs from statutory registers held by bodies like the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC)

or the General Medical Council (GMC), as professionals are not obliged to be registered to practice. The BSE has recently started working with the Academy of Health and Care Science (AHCS) to simplify the process for BSE-accredited echocardiographers to achieve registration and also to optimise pathways to STP equivalence, enhancing the quality and consistency of care across the sector and protecting the workforce as echocardiography services evolve. More information on these initiatives will be shared in the coming months.

References

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