

Reflecting on Practice and Playing the Tick Box Game: Colonising Accountability, Phronetic Knowing Lifeworlds and the Appraisal of Medical Professionals

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The paper, primarily based upon over 63 interviews with consultants and managers at two London-based teaching hospitals, theorises the introduction of performance appraisal for senior public sector hospital medical professionals. 'Consultant Appraisal' was introduced according to an overall managerial philosophy which rhetorically emphasised the values of quality and learning. But (Rashman & Hartley, 2002) warn that this 'modernisation agenda' actually emphasises incentives, detailed performance measurement and management, the privileging of explicit over tacit knowledge and it is more likely to promote cynicism than learning! Appraisal was designed 'to provide a formally structured opportunity for professionals to engage in dialogue, and to reflect on how their effectiveness might be improved rather than to catch those performing poorly' (Department-of-Health, 2000). Yet it attempts to serve multiple and perhaps conflicting purposes; facilitating reflective practice and learning (which depend upon openness, ownership and trust); performance measurement and management (the system requires recorded evidence); and catching problem doctors (medical licences are dependent upon successful appraisals). And appraisal is a system which is designed by the Department of Health yet administered by professionals. Tensions and paradoxes exist. We develop a theoretical framework with which to test whether, and understands how and why the appraisal process might 'get out of hand' (Broadbent, Laughlin, & Read, 1991). We argue that medical professionals, after reflecting on their practice and lifeworlds, may end up 'playing the tick box game' to avoid being 'colonised' by the accountability based lifeworld of the Department of Health which they see to be 'out of hand'. We suggest that appraisal conducted in the context of the 'Audit Society' (Power, 1997) may inevitably involve 'playing the tick box game'. But unless the rules of the game are based upon a better understanding of professional knowledge, particularly its phronetic aspects (Flyvbjerg, 2001; Townley, 1999; Tsoukas, 1996), and professional self-regulation through *intra*-professional competition (Abbott, 1988), the game will end in cynical conformance with very minimal standards, a no score draw!

References

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