

ABSTRACT

With the end of GP fundholding and the establishment of the new Grampian Primary Care NHS Trust, the employment of primary care counsellors within Northeast Scotland is in a state of flux. This study obtained information about the backgrounds, working arrangements, and experiences of counsellors along with their views about future counselling provision in order to facilitate future development of counselling services within the region. The research was undertaken from a Gestalt perspective which recognises the centrality of the relationship between the researcher and the field of enquiry at all stages of the project. During the course of the study, funding for GP counselling was abruptly terminated which created some suspicion towards the project. Of the 17 practice counsellors identified by practice managers, eight counsellors, representing 11 practices, took part in a postal survey and six of these were interviewed. Respondents had a variety of professional backgrounds, and only one was accredited by a national body. Most were self employed and were paid for clinical activity only, with no line management or service evaluation. Hours of work varied, as did caseload and pay. All counsellors received referrals from GPs who also generally served as 'gatekeepers' for referrals from other sources, and the majority of counsellors believed they never received inappropriate referrals. The most frequently counselled problems were relationship problems, anxiety, depression and bereavement and most counsellors did not have a fixed limit on the number of sessions they could offer patients. Communication between counsellors, GPs and other practice staff varied considerably, as did communication with the secondary services, and only one counsellor attended practice and community mental health team meetings regularly. All counsellors interviewed saw a need for greater integration and regulation of counselling, including the standardisation of training and accreditation, fee structure and contracts, although there was widespread concern about potential marginalisation of counselling. Issues which should be considered in any future counselling service are identified and recommendations made about future research and development.