

Supporting GP Registrars to Manage Complexity

Presenter: Dr Sonya Morrisey

Overview

Sonya explored the increasing complexity of contemporary general practice and the important role GP supervisors play in supporting registrars who are managing complex clinical presentations. Drawing on her experience working in Headspace and youth mental health, she emphasised that complexity extends beyond medical diagnoses to include psychosocial, systemic and clinician-related factors. Throughout the session, she highlighted practical approaches to supervision that promote registrar confidence, wellbeing and sustainable practice.

Understanding complexity in general practice

Complexity is becoming an increasingly common feature of Australian general practice. Data suggest that many GPs perceive increasing complexity in their daily work, with growing responsibility for managing presentations traditionally seen in specialist settings, particularly in mental health.

Rather than viewing complexity as a characteristic of the **patient**, Sonya encouraged supervisors to think of **the consultation or presentation as being complex**. Complexity often reflects an interaction between medical, psychological, social and health system factors rather than any single diagnosis.

Factors contributing to complexity include:

- coexisting physical and mental health problems
- psychosocial adversity
- trauma and adverse childhood experiences
- homelessness and substance use
- financial hardship and cost-of-living pressures
- limited access to services
- increasing administrative demands on GPs.

She also noted that complexity is frequently influenced by the clinician's own emotional response to the consultation, meaning that two GPs may perceive the same patient very differently.

Why registrars should learn to manage complexity

Although registrars often encounter fewer complex patients than experienced GPs, Sonya argued that supervised exposure is an essential part of training.

Managing complexity allows registrars to develop skills in:

- prioritising multiple problems
- shared decision making
- managing uncertainty
- time management
- multidisciplinary care
- communicating with vulnerable patients
- maintaining professional resilience.

While supervisors may be tempted to redirect difficult patients to themselves, doing so can reduce valuable learning opportunities. With appropriate supervision, challenging consultations become some of the richest educational experiences during training.

Supporting registrars in complex consultations

Sonya emphasised that supervising complexity is fundamentally the same as supervising any aspect of general practice, but with increased attention to registrar wellbeing.

She highlighted three complementary domains of supervision:

- **Clinical supervision** – ensuring safe patient care.
- **Educational supervision** – promoting learning and reflective practice.
- **Personal supervision** – supporting the registrar's wellbeing and emotional responses.

Regular informal check-ins before and after consulting sessions provide valuable opportunities to identify concerns, discuss difficult interactions and normalise the emotional challenges associated with complex care.

Lessons from the Headspace model

Drawing on the Headspace registrar program, Sonya described several practices that support learning in high-complexity environments.

These included:

- comprehensive orientation
- observation of experienced clinicians
- structured multidisciplinary exposure
- longer consultation times
- protected supervisor availability throughout the day
- formal end-of-day debriefing
- regular reflective discussions focused not only on clinical decisions but also on how consultations affected the registrar emotionally.

She emphasised that while many practices may not have the same resources, the underlying educational principles remain applicable in all settings.

Teaching registrars to tolerate uncertainty

One recurring message was that registrars often feel pressure to solve every problem during a single consultation.

Instead, supervisors should help registrars recognise that:

- most complex problems require multiple consultations
- prioritisation is a core general practice skill
- uncertainty can be managed safely over time
- continuity of care is often more valuable than immediate resolution.

Helping registrars decide "**What is most important to achieve today?**" was presented as one of the most valuable supervisory questions.

Boundaries, wellbeing and sustainability

Working with vulnerable young people can expose clinicians to significant emotional demands, including vicarious trauma and moral injury.

Sonya stressed the importance of helping registrars develop:

- professional boundaries
- healthy work routines
- opportunities for peer support
- self-compassion
- realistic expectations of themselves.

She encouraged supervisors to model vulnerability by openly discussing their own mistakes, uncertainties and difficult consultations. Such conversations help normalise imperfection and reinforce that learning continues throughout a GP's career.

The value of multidisciplinary care

The webinar highlighted multidisciplinary collaboration as an essential component of managing complexity.

Registrars benefit from:

- observing multidisciplinary meetings
- participating in case discussions
- understanding the roles of different health professionals
- learning when and how to seek assistance.

Sonya also emphasised that peer support—both formal and informal—is critical for maintaining professional wellbeing and sustaining long-term practice.

Key messages

- Complexity is best understood as a feature of the consultation rather than the patient.
- Supervisors should actively support registrars to engage with, rather than avoid, complex presentations.
- Effective supervision includes clinical, educational and personal support.
- Reflection on emotional responses is as important as discussion of clinical management.
- Registrars need to learn that not every problem must be solved in one consultation.
- Continuity, teamwork and multidisciplinary care are central to managing complexity.
- Professional boundaries, peer support and self-compassion are essential for sustainable practice.
- Supervisors who model curiosity, vulnerability and lifelong learning create psychologically safe environments that foster registrar growth.