

# Professional Competence

## Does Not Carry a Lifetime Guarantee

by Gloria Quinlan

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Does a professional, certified competent to practise at the time of licensing, remain so for the rest of his career?

The problem is of particular importance to the various associations, institutions, and societies who have been granted powers by the provincial governments to license and set standards for qualification and practice. These bodies are responsible for, and in many ways

control, the professions in Canada. One conclusion many of them are reaching is that competence declines or is seriously hampered if the professional does not keep learning throughout the duration of his career. Competence does not come with a lifetime guarantee.

The need for continuing education, or, as it is commonly called, professional development, stems mainly from the knowledge explosion. It has been estimated that man's knowledge has doubled in the first half of the 20th century, and that it will continue to double every five years or less. This phenomenal growth of knowledge means that a professional, qualified and admitted to practice in 1976, could find all he learned obsolete before he reaches the midpoint of his career.

A further reason for professional development is more subtle and complex. It is the need to protect the public from the professional who has not maintained his competence. As this need becomes more vocalized, the possibility of government intervention in the control of the professions increases.

### Protecting public

Professional bodies have in the past concentrated their efforts on protecting the public from the unscrupulous or unethical practitioner. A survey of professional bodies in Canada shows that their methods of protection from the less obvious danger of incompetence are not so well developed.

Quebec's answer to overseeing professional competence is to require each professional group to institute a professional inspection committee to supervise the practice of its members. This committee has authority to inspect member's files and records and can recommend that individual members receive refresher training. Member's rights to practise are restricted while such training is underway.

### Basic difficulty

The basic difficulty in coming to grips with the problem lies in how to determine an adequate standard of competence which can be applied equally to all members of a profession. It is generally accepted that competence, while it embraces an individual's knowledge and skills, also includes the abstract elements of judgement, attitude, and the ability to apply appropriate principles to a practical situation. These attributes are not readily quantifiable.

Even those groups actively engaged in professional development admit that they are still concerned about members who do not voluntarily participate in

workshops and seminars. These members are generally the ones most in need of refresher training. They are candidates for incompetence.

Many professional bodies, therefore, are turning to a system of required or mandatory professional development to guarantee a minimum of refresher training for all members. Of those surveyed, 52% have either implemented required professional development, are in the planning stages of introducing it, or are seriously considering it. Forty-one per cent are not studying this possibility and a further 7% either feel they are too small to warrant such a program or that they lack the powers to enforce it.

### Trend emerging

The trend to obligatory professional development is clearly an emerging one. It is also a significant one. It shows that professional bodies are prepared to accept responsibility for the continued competence of their members, and in so doing, are acting to protect the public. Many are beginning to accept the premise that continued competence is no longer a matter solely between a professional and his conscience. It is now a subject of concern to all members in that profession.

Many professional bodies are reluctant to introduce such changes, fearful that their membership will balk. Those opposed to mandatory requirements cite the problems of administering the reporting system, the additional costs to the professional association to operate the program, and the costs to the individual member to take the required courses. Others say they do not have the time to participate in a prescribed number of courses and prefer to take programs according to their own needs and timetables. But these problems are not insoluble as shown by the number of professional associations that have adopted mandatory programs.

If the main purpose of a professional body is to protect the public, the wishes of professionals themselves assume only secondary importance. As professional societies begin to realize this and take a stand, the trend toward mandatory professional development will accelerate.

It would be simplistic to suggest that mandatory educational requirements solve the complex problem of maintaining professional competence. Such requirements are more a dose of prevention than a total cure. The solution lies in a combination of methods, of which required professional development, is only one.

## Legendary Surveyors



YEN-LO WANG

Royal Surveyor, Fifth Court of Hades  
Ming Dynasty, 16th Century.