



Position Statement on the use of role titles such as “Associate Physicist” to describe scientists working as Medical Physicists and Clinical Engineers in clinical environments

1. Introduction

Medical Physicists and Clinical Engineers working in a healthcare environment perform a wide range of duties across many different professional roles. For some roles, such as Clinical Technologist, registration is not mandatory; however, voluntary entry onto accredited registers such as the Register of Clinical Technologists is strongly recommended to demonstrate an individual’s commitment to high professional standards and to increase public confidence in the profession. For those Medical Physicists and Clinical Engineers working as Clinical Scientists, registration with the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) is mandatory in order to practise.¹ The role of the HCPC is to protect the public, which it does by setting the standards for education, training and practice for those individuals on its register and in order to ensure this, the title “*Clinical Scientist*” is protected in law. There are occasions when an individual, who is not a registered Clinical Scientist, may need to practise as such, for example during training, but this can only be done under appropriate supervision and the individual may not apply the title Clinical Scientist to themselves.

The majority of Clinical Scientists are employed by the National Health Service (NHS) in many different scientific specialisms and in order to provide clarity, NHS Employers publishes a set of national role profiles for healthcare science.² These generic profiles cover the wide range of healthcare science professions and are divided into two categories: healthcare science practitioner profiles* and Healthcare Scientist – Clinical Scientist profiles. In the case of the practitioner role profiles, registration is not required, with the exception of Biomedical Scientists; however, the descriptor to the Healthcare Scientist – Clinical Scientist generic profiles states that “*these are roles where registration as a clinical scientist applies comprehensively*”.²

With the generic profiles published by NHS employers covering a wide range of clinical scientific specialties, considerable variation is to be expected in individual role descriptions. Over recent years, a small number of Medical Physicists and Clinical Engineers who are not on the HCPC register have been employed in roles called Associate Physicist, or similar, that would appear to be broadly consistent with the role of the Clinical Scientist as described by the national profiles. The reasons for this are varied and include individuals undertaking project work in non-clinical roles; those working under supervision towards HCPC registration through equivalence or Route 2; and, on occasion, those that appear to be undertaking the role and responsibilities of a Clinical Scientist, but who are not on a clear route to registration and have an indeterminate level of supervision. It is these latter roles that cause concern to IPEM.

2. Our position

IPEM recognises the importance of protecting the public by regulating healthcare professions through statutory regulators such as the HCPC, and voluntary Accredited Registers. It also recognises the need to provide clarity to the public and other healthcare professionals by maintaining a clear distinction between those regulated professions with protected titles such as “Clinical Scientist” and unregulated professions. Using titles such as “Associate Physicist” or “Trainee Medical Physicist” helps in maintaining that distinction and reducing ambiguity, but individuals in these roles should not perform the function or carry the responsibility of a Clinical Scientist, as this is contrary to the principles and purpose of regulation and the maintenance of high professional standards.

3. Recommendations

IPEM recommends that the title of “Associate Physicist” be reserved for roles that have little or no clinical component to them and should not be used for roles which carry the function and responsibility of a Clinical Scientist. Under circumstances where there is some limited clinical involvement required, such as some research work, the Associate Physicist post-holder should be clearly acting under the robust supervision of a Clinical Scientist. In circumstances where an individual is in training and undertaking supervised practice IPEM recommends using the prefix “Trainee” in the title i.e. Trainee Clinical Scientist, rather than Associate Physicist. If there is ambiguity as to whether a specific role requires the appointment of a Clinical Scientist, IPEM recommends that the NHS Employers’ National Role Profiles,² are consulted.

References

1. <https://www.hcpc-uk.org/about-us/what-we-do/>
2. <https://www.nhsemployers.org/-/media/Employers/Documents/Pay-and-reward/National-Profiles-for-Healthcare-Science-Sept-2018-for-web.pdf?la=en&hash=FE1008DFCC7F6BA390D8022633AB5548AD623FA2>

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This document has been prepared and published on behalf of the Institute of Physics and Engineering in Medicine (IPEM) to set out its position on this topic.

For further or updated information, please see the IPEM website at www.ipem.ac.uk.

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