

Medical Member of the Mental Health Review Tribunal

Dr Anne Montgomery

Dr Montgomery was first appointed as a medical member of the Mental Health Review Tribunal (MHRT) in October 2006.

What attracted you to this post?

Throughout my career I was aware of the MHRT and in 1989 I was actually invited to join the Tribunal. At that stage of my career I was a busy consultant in Psychiatry of old age and general psychiatry. So, unfortunately I was unable to consider accepting a judicial role as it would have involved me taking time out of my hectic clinical work schedule.

However, as I came to the end of my career I was looking for another challenge and I discovered that NIJAC was seeking to recruit new medical members for MHRT. I knew that this would be of great interest to me but I had not been interviewed for a job since 1985! Deciding to have a go I was lucky enough to be appointed.

What is the role of the Medical Member?

The medical role on this Tribunal is different from other tribunals as the medical member is required to examine the patient's mental state on the day of the tribunal or very close to the hearing date. The medical member reports her/his findings to the other panel members just before the commencement of proceedings.

In order to be as helpful as possible to the legal and lay members of the Tribunal the medical member must have a sound and broad knowledge of medicine, in general, and psychiatry in particular. This knowledge allows for the medical member to explain any medical/psychiatric matters which may arise.

What is a typical day like?

Each session begins for the medical member at approximately 11.30am, on the day of the tribunal.

The patient is interviewed at the ward or community facility where s/he is residing so the MHRT can be held anywhere in Northern Ireland - it can mean an early start. The importance of the independence of the tribunal is usually explained to the patients. Additionally, it is also important to put patients at their ease so that they feel comfortable in talking to a complete stranger about a very important life issue. The patient interview usually lasts about 45 to 60 minutes.

The medical member will also take the opportunity to talk to those who are working with the patient with the view of discovering if there is anything else of relevance to

the tribunal since the Panel first received the formal reports. It is also helpful to review the medical, nursing and occupational therapy notes at this time.

The tribunal meets at 1.30pm. I then report my findings to my two other panel members and they have the opportunity to raise any medical queries that they have had when reading the papers. The case papers usually arrive several days in advance of the hearing date and pre hearing preparation can take between 2 – 3 hours for each panel member.

The legal member chairs and conducts the proceedings. S/he will give the medical and lay members an opportunity to ask questions of all the witnesses. This can last from three quarters of an hour to four hours and occasionally a very complex case will have to be adjourned. Once the evidence has been presented the patient and witnesses leave.

The Chairman will lead the discussion and facilitate the Panel in reaching a decision. This final decision is written by the Chairman and the draft is sent to the other two panel members to ensure correctness.

How much support do you have?

The support from the secretariat is excellent. We have regular training sessions for all members. The medical member is also expected to keep up with continuing professional development within his/her specialty and in general psychiatry.

What is the most challenging aspect of your work?

The most challenging aspect of the work is the risk assessment of dangerousness. Many patients have been in the protective environment of a hospital for a long time and therefore they have not been exposed to life in the community.

Is the work conducive to a good work life balance?

Each month the administrative team will contact members to check for availability. The Tribunal has to take place within six weeks of the request coming in to the office. They also let everyone know as soon as possible if a tribunal has had to be cancelled. I have never felt pressurised to do more than I wish to do, so there is no problem about work/life balance.

Would you recommend a judicial medical role to other medical professionals?

Yes. This is very interesting work which uses all your knowledge and experience as a psychiatrist to ensure that those, who are severely mentally ill and a risk to themselves and/or others, are treated appropriately and have their human rights protected.

It is also provides an opportunity to work with skilled lawyers and lay members with great wisdom and knowledge of life in a friendly positive atmosphere while making very serious decisions about people's liberty.