

# How fair is the KSF?

## — staff perceptions and concerns

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Pharmacy staff views on the potential impact of the NHS Knowledge and Skills Framework on their daily practice were assessed in a recent study at a London hospital. This article describes the findings, and how staff and managers need to work together to minimise resistance to change



Staff were asked their opinion of the KSF in semi-structured interviews

**A**genda for Change is the most radical shake up of the NHS pay system since the NHS was established, applying to over a million staff. It involves adopting a new learning and development framework, the NHS Knowledge and Skills Framework (KSF).

The KSF defines and describes the knowledge and skills which NHS staff need to apply in their work in order to deliver quality services. It provides a single, consistent, comprehensive and explicit framework on which to base review and development for all staff.<sup>1</sup>

Recent articles have described the key themes of the KSF,<sup>2</sup> using the KSF to assess competence<sup>3</sup> and linking the KSF to continuing professional development.<sup>4</sup> One trust described how it has implemented the KSF into its existing procedures in the pharmacy department.<sup>5</sup>

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Introduction of the KSF into daily practice will result in inevitable changes to the work of staff in all organisations, and every effort will need to be made to ensure that the framework is fair and transparent for all staff.

Guy's and St Thomas' NHS Foundation Trust has one of the largest pharmacy departments in the UK, employing over 300 staff. In 2002, it became one of the 12 early implementer sites for Agenda for Change, taking the national lead for pharmacy. This article will describe the background of how individuals deal with change, and the findings of research into staff perceptions of the KSF, conducted in the pharmacy department at Guy's and St Thomas' NHS Foundation Trust. It will focus on aspects relating to fairness when organisational change occurs.

### Organisational change

The term "change" has become synonymous with upheaval and chaos<sup>6</sup> and it has thus become important for organisations to better understand how to manage and cope with change. Most authors who have written about change have identified that the success of an organisation's change effort relies upon human factors.

There are a number of theories of change in the literature, which can be placed along a continuum ranging from incremental to radical change, and including change to individuals (micro level change) or to groups (macro level change).<sup>6</sup>

Revolutionary change is defined as a change that:

- Forcefully interrupts the status quo
- Happens quickly and abruptly
- Is fundamental and all encompassing
- Brings about something that is diametrically different to what used to be.<sup>6,7</sup>

Understanding how an organisation can best support its employees during a change is critical because some of the most common concerns organisations have about their staff (eg, low job satisfaction, high stress levels, burnout, and low commitment) appear to be linked to the level of support in the work environment.

It can be argued that implementation of the KSF will be a revolutionary change for many organisations having gone through the Agenda for Change process, especially considering the all encompassing nature of the KSF and the deadlines for implementation set by the Government.

## — The people factor

When change is revolutionary and affects everyone involved, it is critical that the “people factor” is taken into account. Change creates uncertainty, anxiety and stress and any changes which have a large impact on the work that people do will affect their self-esteem.<sup>8,9</sup> Linked to the impact on self-esteem is a performance effect. During periods of change, performance can be affected in three ways:<sup>10</sup>

- New systems and processes need to be learnt. This takes time and there is a learning curve effect.
- New systems bring problems. There is a progress effect where these are dealt with and modified.
- Significant organisational changes can create a decline in self-esteem affecting performance.

Individuals go through a reaction process when they are personally confronted with major organisational change. Scott and Jaffe describe this process as consisting of four phases:<sup>11</sup>

- Initial denial
- Resistance
- Gradual exploration
- Eventual commitment

It is often easier for management to focus attention on, and to become preoccupied with, the technical side of change, dealing with quantifiable and predictable issues such as developing strategies and action plans.<sup>12,13</sup> When a significant amount of money is invested in creating the planned change, often little is invested in communication, training and the follow-up needed to implement the change successfully.<sup>14,15</sup> Most employees expect to have their views considered and to be treated with respect.

## Panel 1: Characteristics of the study participants

- Two experienced senior pharmacy technicians who manage a specialist area
- An experienced senior pharmacist in a unique role providing a service
- A newly qualified pharmacist in a training role
- An experienced senior pharmacy technician in a training provider role
- A senior pharmacy manager with an extensive role in managing a large service with a large number of staff
- An experienced senior pharmacist providing a mainstream pharmacy service

## Panel 2: Key interview questions

Questions asked to gauge staff perceptions of the Knowledge and Skills Framework (KSF) included the following:

- What are your views on the impact of the KSF on the pharmacy department?
- What are your views on how the KSF will affect you?
- How do you think the KSF will be monitored and evaluated?
- What, if any, impact do you think the KSF will have on service development?
- What, if any, impact do you think the KSF will have on recruitment and retention?
- What do think will be the impact of the KSF on how we currently do our work?
- How do you think the KSF will link to life-long learning?

However, some may find that their input into procedures for implementing change is ignored by the management, leaving them feeling disillusioned. Some change initiators resort to manipulation and coercion to overcome any resistance. These practices can result in mistrust and resentment, making change more difficult to implement.<sup>14,16</sup>

The implementation of the KSF is intended to be in partnership with both staff and managers. Ensuring that this is the case will help minimise any potential resistance to change.

## — Study design

The study was carried out in March this year, before the KSF was implemented in the pharmacy department at Guy's and St Thomas' NHS Foundation Trust. The aim was to examine the views of pharmacy staff on the potential impact of the KSF and the associated organisational change, and its impact on individual practice.

Seven participants were selected by purposive sampling to take part in semi-structured, face-to-face interviews. The sampling strategy adopted for this study was to interview the junior and senior members of each of the pharmacy groups, as defined by length of experience, roles and responsibilities of participants. The characteristics of the seven participants selected are shown in Panel 1.

Each interview lasted 30–45 minutes, and was based on the KSF handbook. The key questions that the participants were asked are shown in Panel 2. The responses were transcribed and sorted into themes depending on the terms used by the participants.

## — Findings

Analysis of the results showed that participants had mixed views on the potential impact of the KSF. In terms of benefits, they believed that the KSF would result in more structured career development and more transparent access to training funds. The main concerns raised relate to fairness in the way appraisals will be managed, the time taken to collect evidence and perform

reviews and worries about the nature and quantity of evidence that will be required.

Key themes identified were: appraisal, bureaucracy, career development, competency assessment, evidence collection, fairness, recruitment, time and training.

**Time constraints** One of the most important changes that the KSF will bring is that all staff will have regular appraisals, or development reviews. Participants expressed concern about how these reviews will be carried out when time is limited. One participant said:

*I think the biggest [problem] is going to be finding the time. . . . We hear time and time again [that] people will not do CPD because they have got no time to do it and they are always moaning that there is not enough time to do accurate assessments and . . . all the work that that entails . . . and I can see it coming with the KSF as well. It is in danger of becoming just another 'tick in the box' when appraisal time comes because . . . it is going to pose such a huge chunk of time to try and do it properly.*

**Evidence collection** The fairness of having to collect evidence to support the KSF was questioned by several participants. This is reflected in the following comments:

*I think we are going to end up with a lot more people walking around with bits of paper trying to collect bits of evidence, because everyone is going to say "I need a bit of evidence for this" . . . and what are they doing with this evidence? Is it being utilised in the best way? Are they collecting the evidence . . . and then forgetting about it or are they using those skills and developing?*

*. . . you cannot say you do things, you cannot even have people sign to say you do things — you actually have to have paper photocopied . . . which is very time consuming in a busy environment . . . It just seems a bit of a waste of time to me, photocopying things just to show that you can do something, but I appreciate that you have to prove [it]. . . You cannot even have people witnessing you. . .*

**Evidence assessment** The issue of fairness in assessing evidence was important to most participants. Some were concerned that

managers would undertake the appraisal process in different ways resulting in a lack of clarity about what would reasonably be expected from the staff. This is reflected in the following comments:

*Somebody could be fairly lenient with a member of staff . . . some sort of favouritism could show through . . . and somebody could get an easy ride to the top.*

*. . . we want to make sure [managers] are all assessing to the same standard, to the same level and I guess that is what you want to happen with the KSF appraisers — you want them to be uniform across the department or indeed across the trust. . . . You do not want to be [in] a situation where [staff think] “If I worked in X department I would not have to do all my KSF [evidence collection] — that manager just ticks off all of the boxes.” I think that is the danger, you will get inconsistencies in assessments.*

*I think [evidence assessment] is a massive problem . . . We have found already that it is just not fair, because if the [managers] are going to assess you at different levels . . . and [their views] are going to affect your progression through the KSF, then it is not fair. Unless one person assesses everyone, which is obviously unrealistic, then it is not going to be fair. In theory it should be, because everyone is marking to the same level, but that is never going to happen.*

*Is there [scope] for an automatic sign off [to confirm] that you have got previous experience, skills, knowledge . . . where you do not need to produce the evidence . . . because your manager either knows or has seen you do it?*

These comments become particularly important where pay progression is inextricably linked to the outcome of the review (gateway review).

## Discussion

Anxiety among the participants about fairness of the appraisals is not unexpected since it has been shown that such a change will often result in this type of concern.<sup>17</sup> It must also be remembered that, since the study was conducted before the KSF was implemented, some of the worries of participants may stem from a lack of experience of using the KSF in practice.

Participants' views that different managers would undertake the appraisal process differently were based on their previous experiences of appraisals and it is not unreasonable to think that managers, or appraisers, would have to change their ways of conducting appraisals. Rather than using appraisals as performance management meetings, the ethos of the KSF is around development reviews. Each appraiser will need to be fully trained in the KSF development review process, and there will need to be clear local

guidelines to ensure that all staff are being assessed to the same standards. Appropriate monitoring mechanisms will need to be in place to ensure that, as much as possible, development reviews and the outcomes are consistent and fair. This is especially important for gateway development reviews.

There were concerns that some managers may not invest enough time in the process and would not accurately, or fairly, assess the evidence or the staff member's skills and knowledge. This may happen if a manager has too many staff to review and does not delegate the development review process to other staff. This is potentially going to be a problem for those who manage more than 10 staff or so.

With regards to the nature of the evidence that will be required, it is important to recognise that not all of the KSF dimensions will require written evidence. However, it is equally important to recognise that if there is no recorded evidence the process may not be fair. Organisations and managers will have to decide locally the nature and quantity of the evidence required, to ensure consistency and transparency.

Regarding time constraints, participants expressed concerns about the amount of time that will reasonably be required for evidence collection. Evidence that is easily obtained from daily work should be collected. Some dimensions of the KSF may require staff to collect evidence which may be difficult to obtain and local guidelines may need to be written to assist staff in recognising areas in which they may be able to demonstrate meeting set requirements.

The manner in which the management treats and involves employees during change has been shown to be a powerful determinant of individuals' reactions to major organisational change. Managers and staff need to be equally involved in putting together KSF outlines and agreeing the examples of application for each dimension and level. Managers and staff also need to agree how they will conduct the development reviews and each party will need to know, and agree, their individual responsibilities for this.

## Conclusion

This study found that many participants were worried about the fairness of the KSF. Staff are less likely to have concerns about fairness if they are jointly involved in change implementation. To help make introduction of the KSF more successful, organisations should have clear guidelines on how it will be used and should ensure that staff views are taken into account. Otherwise, staff may be left worrying about this new process and how it will affect their practice, particularly those staff whose first exposure to the KSF development review process will be in their gateway review.

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