

From the President

Professor Lynne Gabriel OBE, President of BACP

‘Raising the profile and standing of our profession is crucial’

Honoured to have been appointed as BACP President, I am keen to support the organisation, its membership and the wider counselling and psychotherapy professions. Some of you will be thinking, ‘So just who is Lynne Gabriel and, more to the point, what is she offering to BACP and to us?’ In the coming months, in my regular column, you will see more about how I’m supporting and appropriately challenging our profession’s development. In the meantime I want to briefly introduce myself then highlight some of the areas where I can contribute.

I’m Professor of Counselling and Mental Health at York St John University and founding Director of the campus-based Communities Centre. I’m also a lead tutor for a master’s research year and supervise PhD researchers. In York, I co-chair the city’s mental health partnership, collaborating and co-producing with colleagues from multiple disciplines, organisations and charities to support the enhancement of citizen mental health and wellbeing. A focus on mental health has been a large part of my life, since setting out as a trainee mental health nurse several decades ago. At that time a relational focus was discouraged, and I have memories of frequently being reprimanded by one ward sister for spending too much time talking to patients. There was a conflict between my desire to put people, not pathology, first and the regimentation of the psychiatric and medical setting. Attitudes and approaches to patient care ultimately led me to leave nursing. It was my subsequent experiences of being a counselling client that ultimately led me to train as a counsellor. Learning about myself as a ‘wounded healer’ and finding positive and supportive ways to live as a flawed human have been rewarding pursuits.

Counsellors and psychotherapists provide valuable and versatile mental health support and can work with people seeking to make changes and deal with life and relationship

challenges. They ought to be widely recognised as a talented and well-trained workforce. The term ‘counselling’ is part of common parlance, but what is not yet commonplace is recognition of counsellors and psychotherapists as core and valued practitioners. Increasing the impact and reach of high-quality and focused research in counselling and psychotherapy will help us to create evidence to influence workforce planning and commissioning of services, and lead to the creation of employment opportunities for practitioners.

While there has been a long-standing tradition of counsellors and psychotherapists providing their work through private practice settings, much less visible are job opportunities across a range of employed contexts. Also less common are practitioners creating their own businesses through, for example, setting up a counselling co-operative or company. As President, one of my key aims is to support the generation of employment and entrepreneurial opportunities for members, and support BACP’s advocacy for our counsellor and psychotherapist members. Raising the profile and standing of our profession is crucial and there is work to be done.



Additionally, I’m keen to extend our profession’s reach with regards to social and relational injustices, and to support BACP’s equality, diversity and inclusion work. One of my first patients as a mental health nurse trainee was a man who was a victim of domestic violence and abuse. Sadly, he went on to die by suicide. His story has stayed with me, and working with victims and perpetrators of different types of abuse has been a theme throughout my career. There are multiple ways in which humans can hurt or harm others. From a position of hope, however, I am heartened that love, compassion, acceptance, inclusion and being seen and heard in authentic and caring ways and relationships are important to most people. Counselling can provide these important human relational conditions and support people to better understand themselves and others.

A further challenge facing the counselling professions is artificial intelligence (AI). Digitisation features in BACP’s five-year strategy. A mental health and wellbeing landscape where AI forms a central feature is close. In the not too distant future we may have humanoids who look like me, you, us, who could be employed in mental health support. How might that impact our profession, our relational and practice ethics, our *Ethical Framework*? Professional bodies need to be at the forefront and involved in debates, development and realisation of any AI-informed counselling and psychotherapeutic work. AI and chatbots offer the potential for accessible therapies, but we need to be proactively engaged in the development, research and integration of advanced AI in the counselling professions.

These are exciting and challenging times and together we can rise to meet the challenges. I look forward to seeing many of you at BACP events and keeping in touch with you through this regular column. ■