

Position Statement

Subject: Pathologists working in isolation
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It is acknowledged that many Pathologists can and do work in isolated situations. However, whilst mechanisms are often in place to reduce the risk of an incorrect diagnosis, this working situation should be viewed as not ideal compared to working as part of a team where other opinions can be obtained quickly and easily.

Risk is an inherent part of any opinion given by a Pathologist. The risk of an incorrect diagnosis varies according to the skill and experience of the Pathologist, the complexity of the case and the ability to manage risk by gaining other opinions. Thus risk management is one of the key ways Pathologists promote patient safety.

The risk of an incorrect diagnosis can be managed in many ways including increasing skill level and experience but gaining the opinion of other colleagues must be seen as a major means of reducing the risk of an incorrect diagnosis.

Pathologists need to recognise when it is appropriate to seek another opinion and they also need ready access to other Pathologists to provide such opinions. Those working in isolation inherently have more limited access to colleagues who can provide alternate opinions.

It should also be noted that the cause of the isolated working environment may not necessarily be due to geographic reasons. Pathologists working in isolation can either be in a single practice or part of a larger group and can be in either the public or private sector.

The ideal situation in which a Pathologist should work is as part of a team of at least two. This allows not only the ability to risk manage their opinions on individual diagnoses but also to increase their skills and experience more generally through obtaining the opinion/s of another colleague/s. Creating a 'team' working situation can be viewed as an optimal quality practice in the same way as having access to books, professional development activities, involvement in QA activities and a suitable physical working environment.

All Pathologists can potentially be placed in unacceptable isolated working situations in which there is poor access to other colleagues' opinions to both risk manage their diagnoses and improve their skills and experience. It is the College's view that these situations in the present Australian and New Zealand health care setting are not optimal with regard to patient safety.