



Hazel Gavigan.

CORU is the statutory body that regulates health and social care professionals (HSCPs) in Ireland. Its role is to protect the public by promoting high standards of professional conduct, competence, education and training. In the event a Fórsa member receives a CORU complaint and is subject to a fitness to practise procedure, the union will provide support, guidance and professional legal advice at no extra cost. HAZEL GAVIGAN reports on this substantial additional membership benefit.

Fitness to practise and union support



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FÓRSA REPRESENTS dieticians, occupational therapists, physiotherapists, social workers and speech and language therapists who are all amongst the professions currently regulated by CORU.

This list will grow to also include clinical biochemists, counsellors, orthoptists, podiatrists, psychologists, psychotherapists and social care workers in the coming months, as these grades are soon to be regulated.

HSCPs must renew their CORU registration every two years in order to maintain their licence to practise. In doing so, they agree to abide by their respective codes of professional conduct and ethics.

These codes set a specific standard of practise for each grade and any complaint made against a registrant (a CORU registered HSCP) will be on the basis that they've allegedly breached this code.

"The moment you receive notice of a complaint, you make contact with us and we'll work together to ensure your response is the most appropriate to the allegations made."

In the event a Fórsa member is subject to a CORU complaint, the union will provide support, guidance and professional legal advice at no extra cost. This is a substantial additional membership benefit.

HELEN, a social worker in Killarney, is a prime example of how important Fórsa's support is when dealing with a CORU complaint. She has experience of them being made against her as both a union and a non-union member.

"I can't begin to describe the difference having Fórsa's backing made to me during this experience.

"The first time 'round there was no escape. I'd come home from work, usually on a Friday evening and there'd be a CORU letter sitting on the ground waiting for me. I'd try my best to leave it until Monday but ultimately I'd always end up opening them and my weekend would be ruined. It felt so personal and my stress levels were through the roof.

"Now I no longer have any direct contact with CORU as all correspondence is conducted through the union. Ashley will email to tell me a letter has arrived, explain what it says and then outline how she thinks we should reply.

"Everything you say is shared with the complainant so having the filter of the union is wonderful as they only provide CORU with information that is absolutely necessary.

"This is just a work issue now, something I don't have to take home with me. My mental health is so much better than the last time and that's down to Fórsa's support. I can't speak highly enough of the service they provide," Helen said.

Escalating

Ashley Connolly, Fórsa assistant general secretary with responsibility for these cases, says the frequency of complaints escalating to hearings significantly increased in the latter half of 2019.

"CORU is a very powerful body and we've started to see it evolve recently as the rate of complaints has increased significantly in the last year. The union has been representing members since CORU's foundation but this is the first time we have a list of cases where they've made the decision to go to public hearing so it's more important than ever to be protected.



Ashley Connolly, Fórsa assistant general secretary.

"The moment you receive notice of a complaint, you make contact with us and we'll work together to ensure your response is the most appropriate to the allegations made. We then become the only source of contact with CORU on your behalf so you no longer have to engage directly with them.

"Often times a complaint won't go any further than the preliminary proceedings committee, which is the first step in the process. However, an increasing amount of cases are being referred on to what's called a committee of inquiry for hearing, which is similar to something you'd see before a court or tribunal.

Cover

"If at any stage in the process I believe it's likely to go to hearing, we immediately engage our legal team. Then myself, a solicitor and if required, a barrister, who are all qualified in professional regulations will meet with the registrant and we start to prepare our defence against the allegations made.

"A complaint can come in at any time so it's vital that practitioners are covered.

Without Fórsa membership they'd be subject to significant legal fees and all the extra stress of directly dealing with CORU by themselves.

"You need to ensure you're protected before anything happens to give yourself that peace of mind."

"The representation we provide only covers incidents that occur when you're in membership. If you receive a complaint, you can't then join Fórsa for support on an issue that predates your membership. In that sense it's like any type of insurance. You can't buy home cover to claim damages after your house is flooded.

You need to ensure you're protected before anything happens to give yourself that peace of mind, and to know that we're here to provide all the support you'll need," Ashley explains ■

CARMEN, a speech and language therapist from Sligo explained, "Being the subject of any professional regulator's investigation is a daunting experience. But it's so reassuring to know that Fórsa will support, advise and represent me at each stage of the investigative process.

"I've found Ashley and the legal team so professional. Their level of expertise and specialist knowledge in the healthcare fitness to practise process is second to none. I really trust I'm in the best hands."

Margaret, a principal social worker in Newbridge, believes everyone should join the union, but particularly emphasised the importance of Fórsa membership for HSCPs.

She explains: "CORU complaints are different to regular court proceedings as you have to prove your innocence as opposed to the complainant proving your guilt. It's a very difficult and emotional time so having proper legal representation is vital.

"I have saved thousands of euro in solicitors' and barrister fees as my regular union sub covered everything. Fórsa have an expert legal team and they cover the entire cost with no expense spared.

"This is a bonus benefit for HSCPs which should be availed of by all. You never know when a complaint will come in against you so preparation is key. The best time to join the union is today."

"Names and locations have been changed to protect the registrants' identities."