Providing psychological services remotely can enhance access to psychological services. But the trend toward telepsychology – the use of communication technologies in the provision of psychological services – has opened the door for evolving legal, ethical and practice issues.

To begin addressing these issues, the American Psychological Association (APA) established the Joint Task Force on the Development of Telepsychology Guidelines for Psychologists in 2011 to create guidelines for the practice of telepsychology. Underscoring the importance of the topic and this work, APA jointly developed the guidelines with the Association of State and Provincial Psychology Boards (ASPPB) and the Trust.

At its July 2013 meeting, the APA Council of Representatives approved the new Guidelines for the Practice of Telepsychology.

The guidelines are intended to both educate and inform practicing psychologists about applying current standards of professional practice when using telecommunication technologies in providing psychological services. The new guidelines are not intended to change or define the scope of practice of psychologists. Rather, they are intended to provide guidance on issues to consider prior to engaging in telepsychology.

The Task Force focused on identifying aspects of the use of telecommunication technologies that differ from the in-person provision of services. Two components taken into consideration throughout the guidelines are:

1. The psychologist’s knowledge of and competence in the use of the telecommunication technologies being utilized; and,
2. the need to ensure the client/patient has a full understanding of the potential increased risks to patient confidentiality and security of data when using telecommunication technologies.

The guidelines address eight key issues related to the provision of telepsychology services: competence of the psychologist; standards of care in the delivery of telepsychology services; informed consent; confidentiality of data and information; security and transmission of data and information; disposal of data and information and technologies; testing and assessment; and interjurisdictional practice (see sidebar at right).

**Highlights of the Joint Task Force process**

The Joint Task Force is composed of 10 members representing APAPO (four members), ASPPB (four members) and the Trust (two members).

Prior to its first meeting, the task force reviewed an extensive bibliography and initiated a survey mechanism sent to all APA governance groups, other related organizations and individuals in order to provide input for the task force on important issues for consideration. The task force established four guideline writing teams to draft guidelines in specific content areas – psychologist’s competence, standards of care in the provision of psychology, interjurisdictional
practice, and confidentiality and security. The entire task force reviewed the writing teams’ input during the spring of 2012. Finalized draft guidelines were disseminated widely during a public comment period that summer. The guidelines were submitted to APA’s Board of Professional Affairs in early 2013 and then forwarded to the Board of Directors for approval in June.

APA guidelines typically take three to five years to establish, but the Telepsychology Task Force completed the Guidelines for the Practice of Telepsychology in two years, with adoption by the APA Council of Representatives during the 2013 APA annual convention in Honolulu, HI.

For more information about the Guidelines for the Practice of Telepsychology, contact the APA Practice Directorate Office of Legal & Regulatory Affairs by email at praclegal@apa.org or by phone at (202) 336-5886.

THE EIGHT CORE GUIDELINES

The new telepsychology guidelines were published in the December 2013 issue of the American Psychologist magazine and also are available online at apapracticecentral.org/ce/guidelines/telepsychology-guidelines.pdf.

The eight core guidelines appear below. The published guidelines also contain rationale and application that elaborate on each of the core guidelines.

Competence of the Psychologist

Guideline 1: Psychologists who provide telepsychology services strive to take reasonable steps to ensure their competence with both the technologies used and the potential impact of the technologies on clients/patients, supervisees or other professionals.

Standards of Care in the Delivery of Telepsychology Services

Guideline 2: Psychologists make every effort to ensure that ethical and professional standards of care and practice are met at the outset and throughout the duration of the telepsychology services they provide.

Informed Consent

Guideline 3: Psychologists strive to obtain and document informed consent that specifically addresses the unique concerns related to the telepsychology services they provide. When doing so, psychologists are cognizant of the applicable laws and regulations, as well as organizational requirements that govern informed consent in this area.

Confidentiality of Data and Information

Guideline 4: Psychologists who provide telepsychology services make reasonable effort to protect and maintain the confidentiality of the data and information relating to their clients/patients and inform them of the potentially increased risks to loss of confidentiality inherent in the use of the telecommunication technologies, if any.

Security and Transmission of Data and Information

Guideline 5: Psychologists who provide telepsychology services take reasonable steps to ensure that security measures are in place to protect data and information related to their clients/patients from unintended access or disclosure.

Disposal of Data and Information and Technologies

Guideline 6: Psychologists who provide telepsychology services make reasonable efforts to dispose of data and information and the technologies used in a manner that facilitates protection from unauthorized access and accounts for safe and appropriate disposal.

Testing and Assessment

Guideline 7: Psychologists are encouraged to consider the unique issues that may arise with test instruments and assessment approaches designed for in-person implementation when providing telepsychology services.

Interjurisdictional Practice

Guideline 8: Psychologists are encouraged to be familiar with and comply with all relevant laws and regulations when providing telepsychology services to clients/patients across jurisdictional and international borders.