



charity no 1187793

Registered

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Dear Colleagues,

We write on behalf of Lactation Consultants of Great Britain, NVL the Dutch lactation consultant association, and European Lactation Consultants Alliance (Elacta), in light of the impact of COVID on exam candidates.

We would ask you to consider the wellbeing and mental health of the IBCLCs, and also the importance of maintaining their continued primary focus on the families they serve at this difficult time.

1. We request that, due to COVID, urgent consideration be given to recertification of experienced IBCLCs by CERP's for those candidates who are re-certifying in 2021. This could reasonably be via an interim arrangement ahead of the 2022 planned change if necessary. Further details outlined below.
2. We also request the option for candidates to defer at the point of application for re-certification, to avoid the additional stress given the impact of COVID as outlined below, of having to go through the deferral process and uncertainty closer to the exam.
3. We request that the 2020 IBCLC certificants are sent their certificates immediately. We appreciate that lockdown regulations make bulk mail outs very difficult at this time and would therefore ask that PDF certificates are emailed out at the earliest opportunity. Lack of physical proof of credential in the form a certificate is impacting on ability to seek employment, promotion and obtain suitable insurance. For example, in some cases a verification letter confirming length of certification (which is what is currently offered by IBLCE) is not acceptable in certain circumstances.

Further information regarding point 1 & 2.

A move to change the recertification method from exam to CERP's would be:

- **Consistent with cancelling exam requirements on degree courses and national examinations at age 16/18.** Adapting the IBCLC recertification method would be in line with other national decisions around qualifications; for example, GCSE (age 16), A Levels (age18) and Scottish Highers have been cancelled two years in succession with alternative methods of assessment being used to award grades. Medical students did not sit final exams last year.

- **A supportive compassionate step by IBLCE as a COVID response to the IBCLC community.** This would enable experienced IBCLCs who are carrying out vital work to maintain their credential without interrupting their focus, depriving families of their care, or exposing themselves to additional risk or financial cost.
- **A reduction of unnecessary additional stress in a health service workforce that is already reporting concerns about mental health and burn out.** Post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is reported to be high in UK hospital staff. Many community staff were redeployed during our first lockdown. Many have worked in crisis mode for almost a year, with little sign that this is soon to change.
- **Acknowledgement of personal circumstances.** Many IBCLCs are also supporting home learning of their own children due to closure of schools. Many have family members who may be extremely clinically vulnerable leading to significant additional responsibilities and stresses. Some are clinically vulnerable themselves.
- **An acceleration of a current plan.**

COVID 19 is continuing to have an enormous impact on the working environment of our experienced IBCLCs; many have worked now for close to a year under emergency crisis conditions. Additionally, the families in our care are experiencing greater trauma having had both a pregnancy and birth during the pandemic. In the UK, we are in our third national lockdown experiencing our highest daily death rates, like many of our European colleagues. Hospitals are at capacity. IBCLCs are working with women and families with high emotional needs, who have had less postnatal and breastfeeding support, requiring both excellent counselling and clinical skills from the IBCLCs.

We have a number of highly skilled IBCLCs considering not sitting the exam due to the current pressures, which would be a great loss.

We feel, in light of the duration and severity of the pandemic and its impact, additional means of recertification are appropriate this year.

Concerns with existing COVID arrangements to note include:

1. It is difficult to know what the future COVID situation will be at the time of application. We cannot predict permitted free movement at the point of examination. IBLCE acknowledges the health risks to candidates of attending a public examination site in a pandemic and asks them to absolve IBLCE of any responsibility before proceeding with their application. In view of the fact that recertification by CERPs will shortly be acceptable for future candidates, the risks involved by insisting on a public exam in a pandemic seem very undesirable and unnecessary.

2. There are very few exam sites in the UK. It is often necessary for candidates to travel considerable distances away from home at a time when everyone is being required to stay at home as much as possible to prevent the

spread of the virus. Scheduling an exam in a pandemic causes candidates unnecessary stress and uncertainty about the likelihood of legality of travel, whether hotels would be open, and if so how this could increase their exposure to COVID -19. Such restrictions have been in place since March 2020.

3. Live remote proctoring is only an option to those candidates with the latest technology/web cams/reliable internet which is a hidden additional cost (and additional barrier for some) of sitting the exam. Many of our members' family incomes have been affected by the pandemic and job loss has been significant. Members working independently have been impacted by restrictions on in-person visits to families and mothers for ten months with considerable financial implications. This makes the prospect of buying new technology or travelling and paying for hotel accommodation (above) even more difficult and unreasonable in the circumstances. The exam for countries in Band A is already very costly without these added expenses. Some members have expressed concerns with LRP regarding the need to use toilet facilities during the exam.

4. Re-certifying by CERPS offers an opportunity to improve one's practice safely, learn new ideas and skills and stay up to date with research. It is undoubtedly more use to experienced IBCLCs and is a safer option for those who would prefer it.

5. Deferral close to the exam date is not enough. Deferral is not a straightforward process and does not sufficiently address the COVID context, risk of exam environment and travel, nor the impact on stress and focus of a rearranged exam.

Given that the requirement to re-certify by examination is to be removed in 2022, we suggest that it would be highly appropriate to bring forward the new arrangements for recertification in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Doing so will enable IBCLCs to remain focused on their valuable work and avoid the considerable stresses, challenges and health risks of an examination. IBCLCs have been doing the most vital work to protect and support breastfeeding families under extremely challenging circumstances over the last ten months and their well-being should be protected and supported.

Please acknowledge receipt. We look forward to your reply.

Yours faithfully,

Zoe Faulkner, Chair, LCGB, Lactation Consultants of Great Britain

Karin Tiktak, Chair, NVL, lactation consultant association of the Netherlands

Mihaela Nita, President, Elacta