

# Perceived challenges in the training and development of a trainee Clinical Embryologist during the COVID-19 pandemic.



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## Introduction

- Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Corona Virus 2 (Sars-CoV-2) is a novel coronavirus resulting in respiratory illness, known as coronavirus disease, responsible for the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic.
- On 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2020 the UK Government announced a country wide ‘lockdown’. In response, the UK regulator of fertility treatment, The Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority (HFEA) issued a general direction (GD0014) instructing all licensed centres to suspend fertility treatment and clinical activity in order to prevent additional strain on the NHS, such as pregnancy complications and multiple births
- In addition, many staff members were re-deployed to support critical areas of the NHS during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- The cessation of fertility treatment had a huge impact on both patients and staff across the fertility sector.

## Challenges faced by a Trainee Clinical Embryologist

The COVID-19 pandemic presented multiple challenges, the main challenge being the cessation of all clinical activity. This in itself presented multiple challenges to a trainee Clinical Embryologist including:

- **Prevention of Practical Skill Development**
- **Loss of skill level due to length of closure**
- **Adapting to a virtual learning platform**
- **Developing procedures and protocols to protect patients and staff during a world wide pandemic**
- **Adapting to modified practice associated with resumption of service**
- **Coping with stress due to uncertainty of re-deployment and resumption of service**

## Overcoming training related challenges by developing key attributes.

The Academy of Healthcare Scientists requires a Clinical Scientist to be competent across five domains as shown in Chart 1. In addition, NES requires a Clinical Scientist to be competent across four domains as shown in Chart 2. The cessation of clinical work and therefore practical training facilitated the development and expansion of key attributes covered under these domains.

Good Scientific Practice for a Clinical Scientist

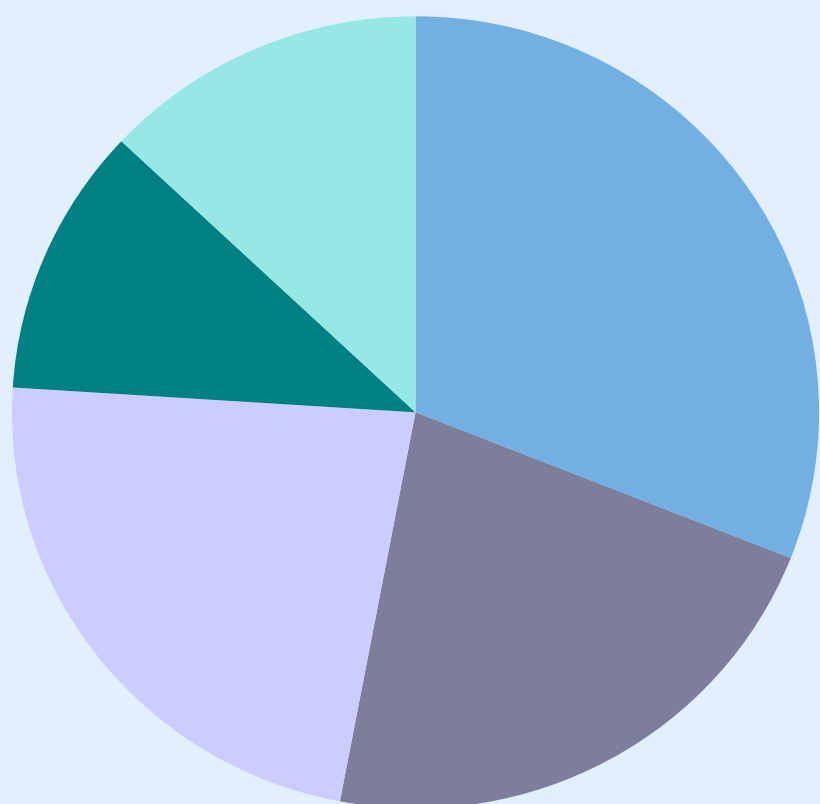


Chart 1: Academy for Healthcare Scientists Good Scientific Practice showing the 5 key domains and the time a trainee should spend on each domain within the three year training period.

Professional Practice Scientific Practice Clinical Practice Research and Development Leadership

NES Core Principles for a Clinical Scientist

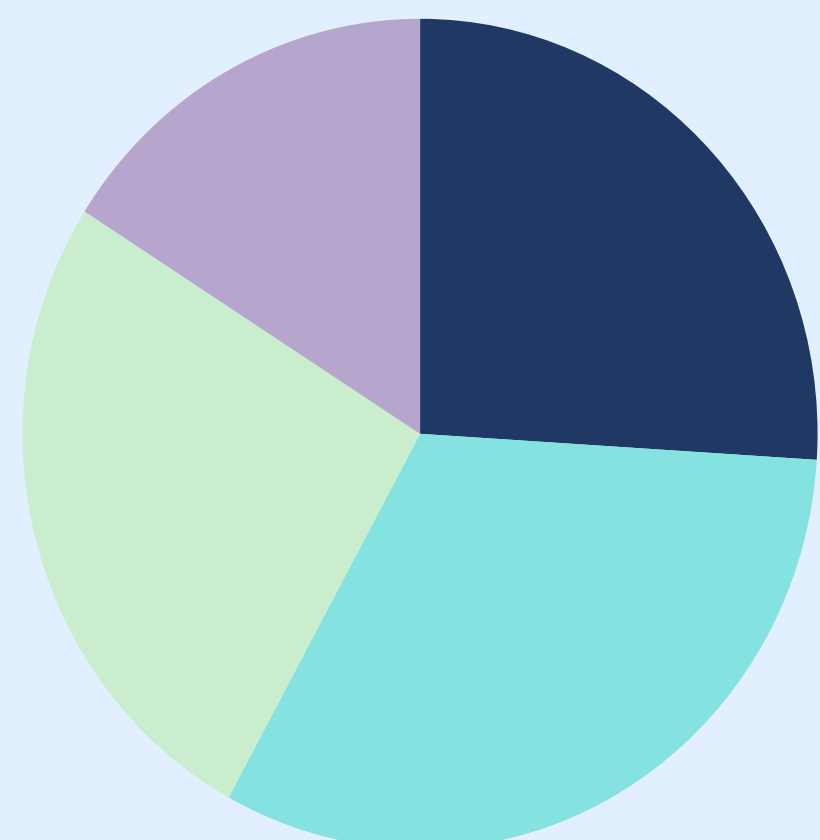


Chart 2: NES Core Principles for a Clinical Scientist showing the 4 key domains and the time a trainee should spend on each domain within the three year training period.

Scientific Practice Leadership and Management Safety and Improvement The Future

The challenges associated with cessation of Clinical Work were overcome by developing and expanding key attributes in other domains essential to Clinical Scientist training. These included development in Safety and Improvement by carrying out Risk Assessments, implementing preventative measures and reviewing patient pathways to minimise non-essential hospital visits. Leadership attributes were developed by being involved in Multi-Disciplinary Team Meetings to improve service development. The “COVID-19 and Fertility Treatment in Scotland: Planning for restarting of treatment” was published by the four NHS fertility centres to take a unified approach to re-commencement of service. Implementing, and ensuring compliance with, the modified practice detailed in this document facilitated the development of key management and communication skills. Professional and Clinical attributes were continuously developed by focusing on self directed learning and virtual learning. In addition scientific and technical skills were expanded through the servicing and validation of critical equipment.

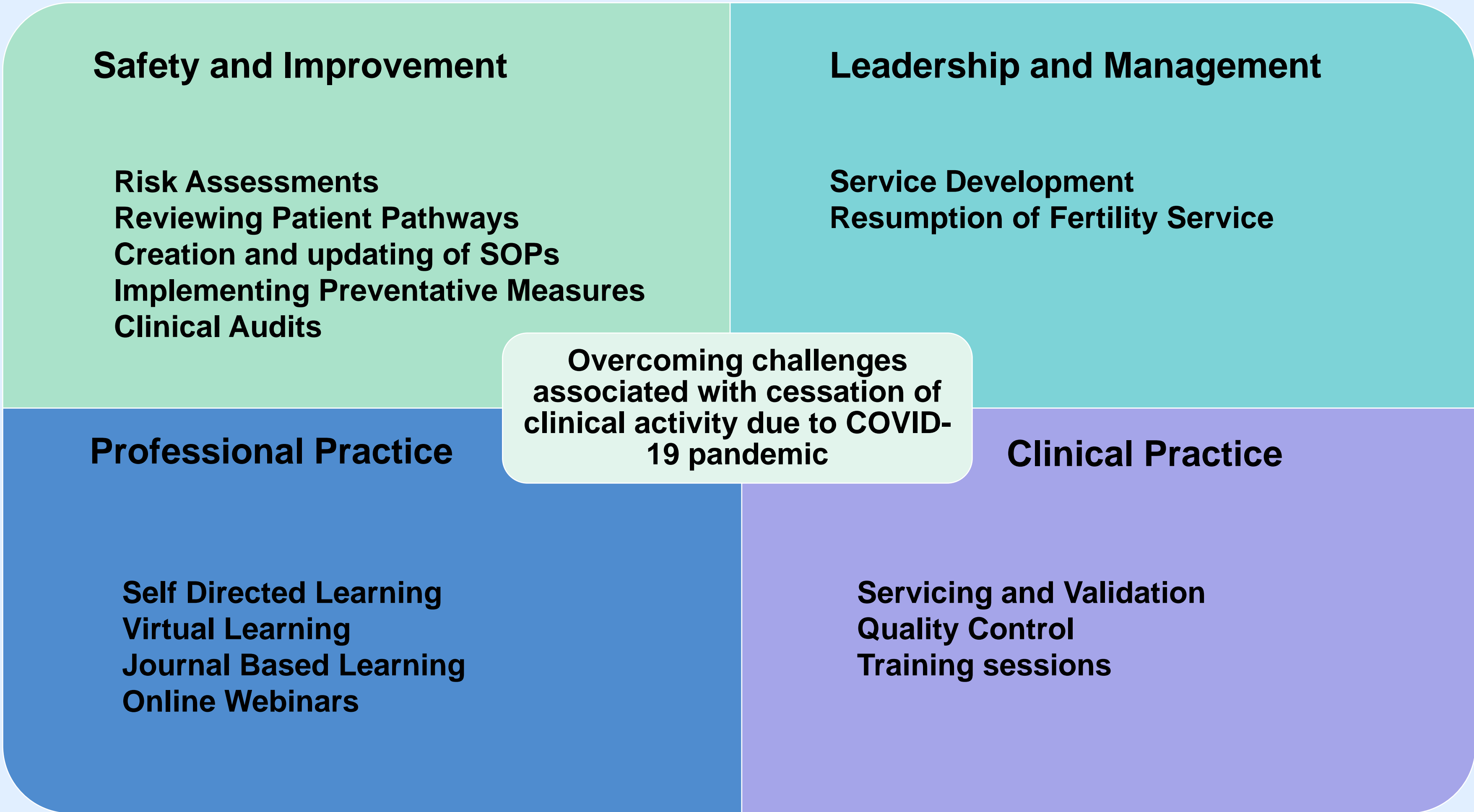


Figure 1: Challenges associated with COVID-19 were overcome by development of domains essential to the training of a Clinical Scientist.

## Conclusion

As a trainee Clinical Embryologist, the main challenge faced during the COVID-19 pandemic was the cessation of all clinical activity resulting in the prevention of practical skill development. This was overcome by developing attributes in the other domains that are paramount to the personal and professional development of a well rounded Clinical Scientist. Although challenging and stressful, this experience has allowed trainees to gain valuable knowledge in developing the service and supporting the department through an unprecedented challenge. The cessation of clinical activity provided the opportunity to develop essential skills in Safety and Improvement, Leadership and Professional and Clinical practice which are fundamental in the training of a Clinical Scientist.