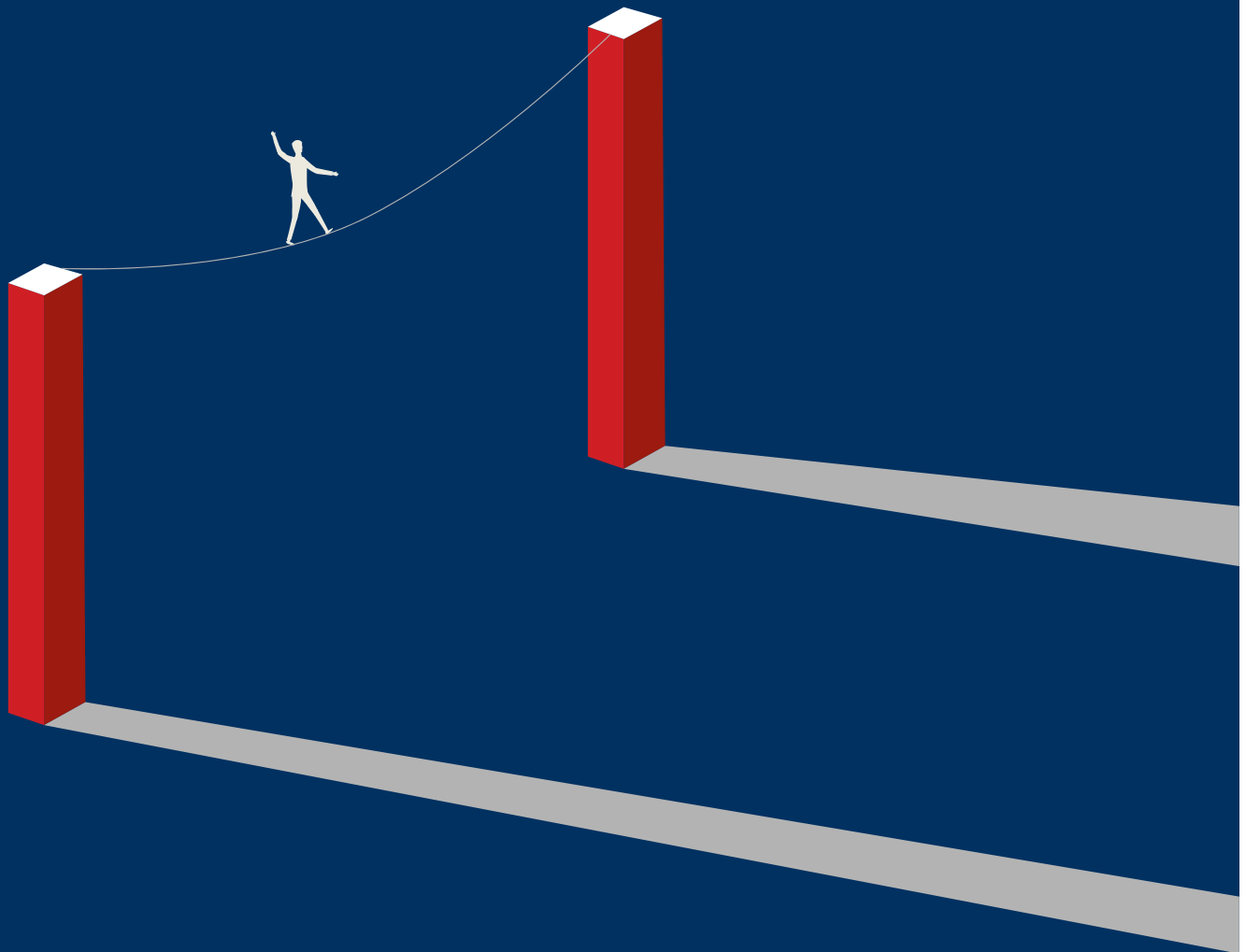


INSI

INTERNATIONAL
NEWS SAFETY
INSTITUTE

INSI GUIDE

Working with high-risk advisors in the field



JOURNALISM | SAFETY | RESPONSIBILITY | COMMUNITY

THE PROJECT

News risk management is a relatively new discipline and its reach and boundaries are still being defined in our industry. There is no doubt, however, that investing in it not only helps protect journalists and news teams, but also enables the best and most courageous journalism to take place, when and where it is most needed.

High-risk advisors (often referred to as safety advisors or security consultants, **from now on HRAs**) are specialist professionals sometimes hired to accompany news teams deploying to high-risk environments, including conflict zones.

This guide provides handrails to support news managers to effectively assess the core skills of prospective HRAs so that they are best matched to support journalists and news teams in these increasingly demanding and dangerous times.

This document is not intended to be prescriptive. It is expected that HRAs working with INSI member organisations will meet some, but not all, of the requirements discussed below, depending on the specifics of the deployment, news organisations' individual risk tolerance and internal risk management processes.

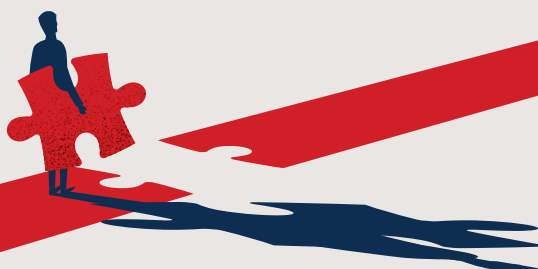
We are grateful to the experienced risk, security and safety leaders from within the INSI membership who have helped develop this guide.



WHY NOW?

A 2023 survey of more than 50 INSI members revealed a sharp increase in the number of news outlets deploying with professional HRAs, as a result of the perceived risk exposure faced by journalists covering the Ukraine conflict. This conflict saw some INSI members deploy freelance HRAs along their news teams for the first time. The high number and extended duration of deployments put huge pressure on exhausted news teams or meant less experienced staff were rotated in. The long distances and numerous active frontlines, as well as the widespread destruction of local infrastructure, meant teams were being exposed to a multitude of risks. As a result, many news organisations turned to HRAs for the first time to support their teams on the ground but also, as one INSI member put it, to reassure journalists and their families that everything was being done to minimise risk to teams on the ground.

This unprecedented demand for security support, made even worse by a series of devastating natural disasters and the current Middle East crisis, has led to a significant shortage of HRAs known to have the specific skills and competencies required to work with journalists in hostile environments, particularly in war zones. Those who have worked successfully with the media before are snapped up quickly, leaving a significant demand that is largely fulfilled by advisors with a background in different sectors, such as NGOs, oil and gas, or close protection. While valuable, this experience does not always match the unique expectations and dynamics of newsgathering, leading some deployed journalists to dispute the usefulness of HRAs altogether. **These issues combined have persuaded INSI members of the need to explicitly evaluate and articulate the role and responsibilities of deployed HRAs in today's newsgathering.**



DO YOU NEED A HIGH-RISK ADVISOR AT ALL?

The Ukraine experience, as well as the current Middle East crisis, have brought into sharp focus the instances when an HRA may be needed and why. However, with dwindling budgets and limited suitable contractors available, INSI members suggest a practical case-by-case approach and open conversations with deployable teams to discuss the benefits and possible drawbacks of having security support, as well as the limitations of not having any.

The need to deploy with an HRA can arise in a number of situations, including when:

- Near frontlines or where a battlefield interpreter is required, for example, to distinguish incoming from outgoing fire;
- There is a lack of medical infrastructure and care available;
- Additional safety and security situational awareness is needed while the team is busy newsgathering;
- A new or inexperienced team requires support or training;
- Additional support with logistics and safety planning is required;
- The team is travelling in an armoured or heavy goods vehicle in an area of conflict;
- There is valuable equipment to protect.

INSI members agree that deployed HRAs are not always necessary, nor should they be seen as the norm. News teams deploying to high-risk zones are expected to be trained and competent to deal with a baseline of accepted risk.

An HRA, however, can prove invaluable to news teams in specific circumstances, but only if their skills, experience and profile are well-matched to the assignment.

ASK YOURSELF:

01. What are the benefits of having a high-risk advisor with your news team?
02. What risks are reduced by having a skilled HRA deployed?
03. What are the main skills an HRA requires in order to work safely and effectively with your specific team?
04. Have you taken into account the profile of the advisor? Will that fit the profile of the assignment? Consider identity aspects such as race, gender and ethnicity.



WHAT MAKES A GOOD HIGH-RISK ADVISOR?

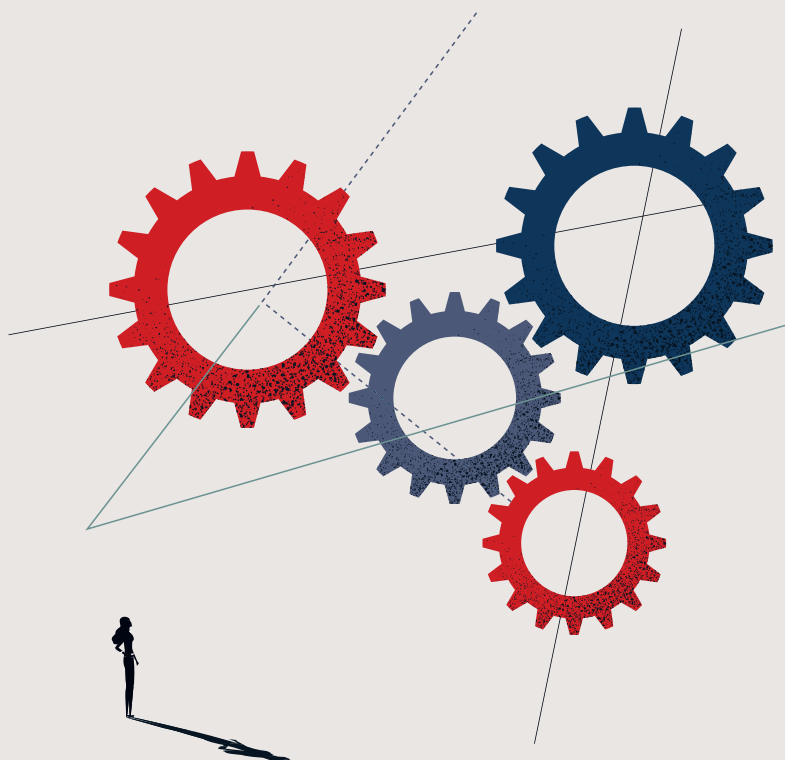
Finding the 'perfect' high-risk advisor, who is simultaneously an expert in battlefield survival, has the medical skills of a paramedic and the social skills to deal with senior news managers, seasoned correspondents and sensitive contributors, is a tall order. **But is it always necessary that they should have it all?**

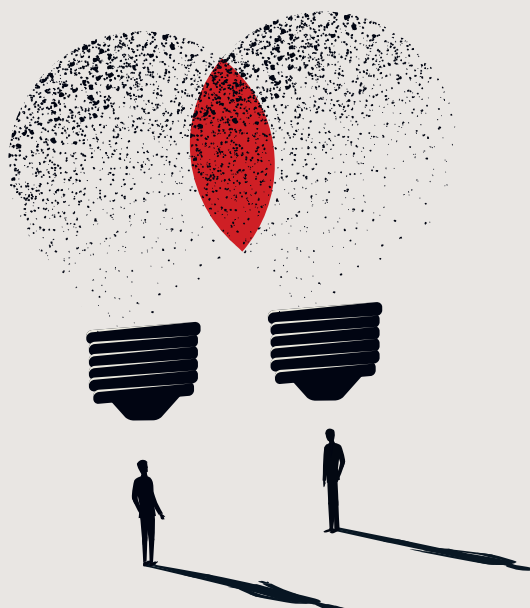
Building on the expertise, real-world experience and needs of INSI members, we look at characteristics, skills and competencies that are essential requirements, and those that are highly desirable, in HRAs supporting news teams in hostile environments.

Previous media experience – desirable, not always necessary

Depending on the assignment, many news organisations tend to 'play safe' and only hire HRAs who have already supported journalists on similar high-risk deployments. While this is entirely reasonable, it is increasingly challenging given the current high demand. It also risks creating a closed network, with no development of much-needed new talent. A lot of people are overlooked for these roles based on a lack of diversity within the profession, not only as deployable advisors but overall in risk management roles. This can only exacerbate the shortage of viable HRAs in times of high need. To change the balance and address this shortfall, **please look at how your organisation can offer opportunities to those who would like to take on this important role.**

An INSI member noted that, despite almost all of their safety and security team in Ukraine having no previous experience with the media, after some training and coaching, they proved to be among the best they had ever worked with.





Military experience – desirable, not always necessary

Just as with previous media experience, there is sometimes a tendency to assume that a military background is always essential for a deployable HRA. But INSI members caution against turning the Ukraine case into the standard. The skills and qualifications needed to support journalists covering natural disasters, political protests or sensitive investigations, for instance, will vary from those needed for a war zone.

In Ukraine, amid brutal frontline battles, many INSI members understandably insist that all HRAs have direct experience gained in combat, including first-aid. However, not all high-risk areas will require previous serving military experience. Whether this is necessary will be determined by the risk assessment which will make clear the type of background needed for the assignment.

Different stories require different approaches. For example, demonstrable expeditionary and survival experience is essential for assignments involving self-supported water crossings, driving for prolonged periods off-road (through deserts, snow), jungle/desert/Arctic assignments, environments which have suffered critical damage or lack travel and power infrastructure, and epidemics in remote places, such as Ebola and SARS. In an earthquake zone, an understanding of disease, clean water, hygiene, and the behaviour of people who are desperate are all vital skills which could be obtained by working for an NGO or humanitarian organisation in a developing country, rather than on the battlefield.

Basic tech awareness is a given, as in being able to operate tracking and SAT phones for instance, but it is also important that HRAs deploying to conflict zones like Ukraine have an understanding of the technicalities of the military warfare seen there, as this will have operational implications.

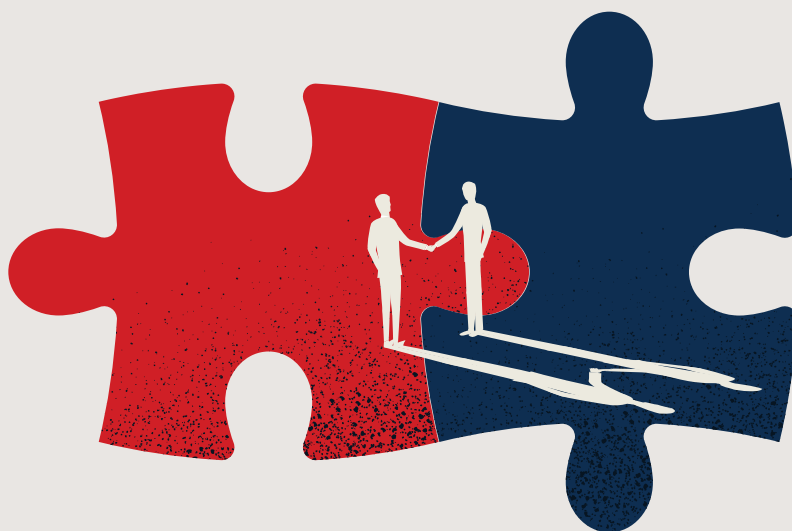
Whether they have military experience or not, there is consensus among INSI members that no HRA should have an overt military-bearing profile or look, as this may significantly increase the risk profile of the team, especially in conflict areas. What's often mostly needed is someone who can anticipate and defuse a tense situation, rather than a bodyguard: more brains than muscle.

Suitable personality – always necessary

Regardless of the background of the prospective candidate, any HRA intending to work with news teams in hostile environments needs to possess a balanced personality and as many as possible, if not all, of the following traits:

- **Cool-headedness.** Understanding that in a stressful, small-team environment, sharing close quarters, tensions can escalate quickly. A proven ability to act as a calming presence, offering moral support in times of stress, is highly valuable. Having worked previously with strong personalities in trying situations would be a good indicator.
- **Resilience.** Understanding that working with journalists can be challenging and that long hours and time spent together in close environments is part and parcel of the job;
- **Flexibility.** Understanding that the role requires being a project enabler and may include high-risk activities such as night-time driving, interviews after curfew and planning at short notice. Last-minute schedule changes are sometimes essential and should be accommodated where possible.
- **Emotional intelligence.** It's important for an advisor not to be dismissive of mental health issues and for them to fully understand the importance of working in a trauma-informed way on the ground.
- **Perspective.** Having the ability to stand back, observe and keep abreast of what is happening.
- **Focus.** An HRA is there, among other things, to be the eyes and ears of the team and cannot get distracted. Other side activities – e.g. personal photography or reporting – are not compatible with the role. *A member reported their team being left alone in a volatile area, as the HRA, who was also a photographer, left the group to take a photo.*
- **Reliability.** It is vital that an HRA understands the expectations of the role, and is capable of delivering on them. Every organisation has different reporting and communication expectations, whether that's writing a short risk assessment before a high-risk task, checking in on a certain platform, or calling in before making critical decisions on the ground. Willingness to understand what these processes are and embrace them is seen by many INSI members as essential.

Having a suitable personality also usually comes with the so-called soft skills. These are some of the hardest skills to assess, but also the most important in an HRA for journalists.



Soft skills – highly desirable

Not all HRAs have the soft skills to work with news organisations, which include communicating clearly with senior management or sensitively with teams in the field. *In one example, a highly experienced former military HRA, who had just arrived to support a team in Ukraine, declared in front of local Ukrainian staff that Russia was certainly going to win the war, irreparably affecting his relationship with the local team from the get-go.*

According to INSI members, important skills include the ability to:

- Contribute to the risk assessment process, as well as other paperwork;
- Plan the assignment with the reporter or producer and offer solutions to potential problems;
- Send detailed, coherent emails and briefings to the team and senior management with considered judgments and recommendations;
- Present to the organisation's senior leadership, including in person over a conference table, with confidence, clarity and authority;
- Communicate effectively, both to senior managers and teams in the field. This includes making quick judgement calls and explaining the rationale behind them;
- Work well with women, ethnic minorities, under-represented groups and LGBTQ+ people;
- Blend into the team rather than act as a the leader;
- Act as a calming influence when needed, providing moral and practical support and ensuring the team are looking after themselves, for example, eating and drinking regularly;
- Maintain a good network in the operational area;
- Language skills: communicating in the local language, in addition to fluent English is a key bonus;
- Possess the relevant knowledge: staying abreast of the fundamentals of the story, the country and the sensitivities around the assignment is essential, particularly in high-risk environments such as Ukraine. *In one instance, a freelance HRA deployed to Ukraine immediately lost the team's confidence when they asked where Donbas was.*



Diversifying the team

News outlets should always aim to get the right profile for the deployment and ensure that the advisor does not increase the risk exposure to the team, or the organisation. The archetypical alpha male character may work very well if you need a bodyguard type, but that's rarely the case in a newsgathering environment where standing out is often dangerous.

Women, people of colour and members of the LGBTQ+ community should also be increasingly considered, as they can prove a better match in certain situations and help reflect the growing diversity of news teams. This may require a bigger effort of outreach on the part of news organisations, but could yield very satisfactory results. *A member said they chose a diverse team of HRAs to support journalists covering the sometimes violent US election gatherings, often attended by armed, far-right protesters. They said a woman HRA, with a background as a Krav Maga, yoga and boxing instructor, proved amazing in supporting their team during volatile protests, both because of her profile and her ability to get them out of trouble.*

Outsourcing the hire – not the due diligence

Specialist security companies are a common way to hire HRAs but entirely delegating your assessment of a prospective advisor is not recommended. It is essential that you evaluate the real-world skills of anyone put forward by a provider through a detailed face-to-face interview, and, if possible, even an introduction with the deployable editorial team. A candidate may have a brilliant CV with extensive experience, for instance, in a high-level close protection role. While that can sometimes be useful, it is rarely a substitute for a thorough understanding of the very different rules of engagement and requirements of working with journalists. *INSI members are finding it increasingly difficult to get anything other than generic formal references, especially from US-based companies. Informal ones tend to be more candid.*

Driving and Parading

In difficult environments, there is a high-risk of road traffic accidents. HRAs should have solid, demonstrable experience operating SUVs and 4x4s and an advanced driving course qualification. Experience driving an armoured vehicle and being able to interact with, and coach, local drivers are also highly desirable skills.

Knowing how to perform basic checks on a motor vehicle before setting off – called parading a vehicle – is another important job for an HRA. It is also worth noting that even experienced journalists and producers may not know how to quickly change a tire on an armoured car in an emergency, or what to do in the event of an accident.

LOCAL HRAS

Hiring local security is increasingly seen as a way of keeping a much-needed low profile, as well as securing a longer-term presence which can be very useful in environments such as the West Bank or Ukraine. Local HRAs will understand and speak the language and culture and have useful ground knowledge and sensibility, as well as contacts in the area.

Although it is still a relatively limited practice, INSI members describe very successful instances of hiring local security. Considerations may have to be given to the level of medical competencies and training compared to international standards. INSI members report that additional training and coaching of their local hires has in most cases proven useful to fill the gaps.

ASK YOURSELF:

01. Has the HRA supported journalists in the past? If not, but they possess other key skills, what options are in place to mentor and nurture a promising new talent?
02. Are they able to provide references from previous employers?
03. Are you able to cross-check those references independently?
04. Can the HRA describe their main responsibilities when deployed?
05. Does the HRA increase or decrease the risk profile?
06. Is there evidence of your candidate's real-world competencies and skills?
07. Does the HRA have the right soft skills and ability to communicate with the team on the ground and senior managers at headquarters?



MEDICAL COMPETENCIES. HOW MUCH IS ENOUGH?

First aid training, as part of HEFAT courses, has long been a key fixture of news organisations' training standards and routines for journalists and crews sent in harm's way. When an HRA is deployed to support a news team, it is often them who are designated emergency responders in the field.

But how do you evaluate your HRA's medical skills to ensure they are effective for the task and also that they would stand up to scrutiny in case of a serious incident?

Recently, some INSI members have gone even further and resorted to hiring specialist medical support to deploy along with their teams on the war frontlines of Ukraine.

It is an expensive proposition likely to bring a significant degree of reassurance to your deployed teams. But is it really necessary?

These are the key issues INSI members identified, in conjunction with experts at Iqarus:

- **No universal standards.** There is currently no sense of certainty or industry standard around what qualifies as appropriate and reasonable medical training, qualifications and experience for supporting news teams deployed to high-risk areas.
- **Training Alphabet Soup.** The myriad of available options for training often only adds to the confusion. Among those commonly found on CVs are MOET, MIRA, FREC3, FPoS(I), Kinetic Areas Trauma Training (KATT), First Person on Scene training, Tactical Emergency Casualty Care (TECC), Tactical Combat Casualty Care (TCCC), Hostile Environment Safety Training (HEST), Stop the Bleed, etc. Managers have to be aware that some of these are 'courses,' and are based on the competencies, or skills, effectively acquired by the attendees. Others are 'qualifications', simply attesting an academic result.
- **Understanding scope and licence to practise.** It is important to note that neither courses or qualifications provide a licence to practise in itself which, if something went wrong, might cause liability issues. Even hiring – likely at huge cost – a paramedic, is not necessarily a guarantee that you will get what you need for your specific deployment. 'Paramedic' is not a universally defined professional role and paramedics' scope of practice may change significantly, depending on the country or the level of qualification.
- **The reach-back illusion.** Some insurance companies offer 'reach-back' or remote telemedicine assistance but this should not be relied on in a conflict zone. The 24/7 reach-back services offered by insurers are mostly meant to support primary care needs of people on business trips with access to nearby medical facilities, rather than providing support during life-threatening emergencies. That means that doctors on such lines may refuse to advise even in the case of a road traffic accident in a remote location.

Training options

HRAs working with INSI members have a wide variety of training options to choose from, usually from third party providers.

- **FREC.** First Response Emergency Care (FREC) courses in the UK teach participants to manage major incidents including traumatic injuries, catastrophic bleeding and shock. FREC is designed specifically to help participants enter Britain's National Health Service ambulance service, progressing from level 3 (usually a benchmark for media companies when hiring HRAs) to level 6 which is the equivalent of a paramedic qualification. **Please note that FREC is an academic qualification rather than one based on competencies.**
- **MIRA and MOET.** Medicine in Remote Areas (MIRA) and Media Operations Emergency Training (MOET) are practical courses endorsed by the Royal College of Edinburgh, one of the oldest and most globally-recognised institutions in this field, and assessed against a list of competencies.
- **Shorter courses** such as Pre-Hospital Trauma Life Support (PHTLS) and Tactical Combat Care (TCCC) also provide internationally-understood qualifications and competencies along with First Person on Scene, Kinetic Areas Trauma Training (KATT), Hostile Environment Safety Training (HEST) and STOP the Bleed.

Remember, none of these courses produce professional medics with a license to practise and often range in price and quality depending on the provider.

Some INSI members have resorted to deploying with paramedics along Ukraine's frontlines.

- **Paramedics.** Assessing paramedics' competencies can however be complex, as the definition of paramedic varies according to country, along with their skills. In the UK, for example, newly-qualified paramedics must work under supervision for two years. Paramedics are also expensive and may not be necessary in every environment because their scope of practice is usually limited to trauma. That means they can't dispense primary health care medications, for example.

Key recommendations

In most cases, fighting skills fade by keeping the competencies of your deployable news team fresh may be the most realistic and effective option. This can be achieved by using a recommended paramedic for refresher training for staff deploying to dangerous locations. Regularly reviewing competencies on procedures such as tourniquets, immobilisation, splints, bandages and packing bleeding is an economical way to combat skills fade at a fraction of the cost of employing someone full-time. Depending on where they are going, staff already trained in core competencies can be given additional training on specific skills right before deployment.

If relying on the medical skills of an HRA, remember:

- **Ask questions.** Not all training providers are equal. When selecting one, find out what equipment they are signed off to use as well as the medical interventions their instructors can carry out, for example treating gunshot wounds, shrapnel or blast injuries. This will help to determine the quality of the training they provide and whether it is appropriate for your deployment.
- **Competencies over qualifications.** There is a growing consensus within the industry that the focus should be on determining the real-world competencies of the person tasked with delivering medical care to the team on the ground, rather than just the academic qualification.

- **PHEM as benchmark.** In the absence of a standard, INSI members recommend using level D of the PHEM Framework of the Royal College of Surgeons, Edinburgh as one way to assess the medical skills of an HRA.
- **Scope of practice.** Before tasking any team members, including HRAs, with providing medical intervention in the field, it is essential that managers clearly define their scope of practice, the medical procedures they are allowed to do, the equipment that they are signed off to use, as all of the above can have life and death consequences, as well as grave legal implications.
- **Mental health training.** As well as having expertise in physical wellbeing and preventing the loss of life, we all know that the environments journalists work in can be very traumatic. Having an up-to-date Mental Health First Aid certification is highly desirable. It's also important to choose an advisor who is not dismissive or minimises the importance of working in a trauma-informed way on the ground.
- **Never assume.** It is essential to choose an HRA with the right level of medical skills and competencies for the assignment, and confirm their real-world abilities before deployment. In a dangerous, remote environment, for example, they may be required to treat, manage and sustain a casualty for up to 12 hours with limited infrastructure, and without any direct medical support.
- **Cross-referencing candidates.** Media networks such as an INSI can be a valuable tool for vetting HRAs as peers may be able to recommend medically-qualified HRAs they have worked with in the past. Gathering feedback from journalists on an HRA's medical and social skills is another useful way of choosing the right person for the job.

ASK YOURSELF:

01. What level of medical training has the high-risk advisor achieved?
02. When was this training last refreshed and is it in line with the standards set by the RCoS? Can this be confirmed by the provider by email?
03. Who taught their course and who was it aimed at, for example, first aid on a battlefield or in the back of an ambulance?
04. Does your organisation have any emergency care, clinical governance or telemedicine (reach-back) to support HRAs and journalists who may have to carry out medical procedures? Have you checked what it actually covers?
05. Have you clearly defined the scope of practice of any HRA working for your company?
06. How will you assess the skills of locally-hired advisors?



CORPORATE LIABILITY

If an HRA makes a mistake and someone loses their life or suffers significant life-changing injuries, the liability must sit somewhere. That is usually the individual, a security vendor or the media company.

To mitigate liability, news outlets must clearly define the scope of practice of HRAs, or anyone carrying out medical procedures. That means making clear, and agreeing in advance, what HRAs, or anyone deployed as a team medic, are allowed to do – and ensuring they are qualified and competent to do it.

As mentioned above, PHEM's Descriptor D, which can be mapped across to FREC3 and MIRA courses, is a useful baseline to assess whether an advisor is qualified. News organisations may want to ensure that their training provider is registered with the RCoS and the course their HRA has completed meets the PHEM Descriptor D requirements.

If using external security companies to recruit HRAs, ask for information and clear evidence of an advisor's training and qualifications. HRAs employed by security vendors may assume that they are not liable for any actions, as the client is free to ignore their advice. This should be clarified by media companies prior to engaging with the HRA or security vendor. Also, it should be clear who the advisor answers to. *An INSI member mentioned a case when an advisor refused to take risks unless the security company that originally employed him authorised it.*

INSURANCE

It is essential to determine who is paying for an HRA's insurance, especially if they are contracted from a security vendor. In such a case, the media company must confirm the level of insurance and coverage provided by the vendor, prior to hiring the advisor. Documentation should be provided to confirm the levels of coverage are sufficient for the deployment and in line with the media company's own requirements. Remember that security vendors often assume that their contractors are covered under the media outlet's insurance.

ASK YOURSELF:

01. Who is accountable for anything that goes wrong, or is perceived to go wrong – the high-risk advisor, the security firm or the news outlet?
02. Is the HRA from an established security vendor or is he/she a sole trader?
03. Does your HRA have adequate insurance, or is cover under your policy needed?
04. What is the level of medical competency of the HRA, and is there documentation to confirm their qualifications?
05. Are there pre-agreed service levels in place between the HRA, the security vendor or the media company?

CONCLUSIONS & ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Journalists are facing unprecedented dangers covering the news around the world. From providing remote medical support, to maintaining situational awareness and managing logistics, the right high-risk advisor will allow journalists to work without distraction, and as safely as possible. A mismatched one, however, may not only fail to add any value, but also raise the profile of the team and potentially endanger it.

While proactive and competent risk management remains an imperative for any responsible news organisation, deploying with an HRA should continue to be decided story-by-story, based on a nuanced risk assessment, the team's composition and level of experience, and the deployment's objectives.

INSI would like to thank all those who participated in this important project for giving their time so generously. In particular, our members from CNN, NBC, News Corp, Reuters, Sky News and Swedish Radio made invaluable contributions to this guide, along with the medical emergency experts at Iqarus who greatly contributed to the practical advice found in the medical, insurance and corporate liability sections.





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