Flexible learning to support safe, person-centred care

Ann Rae explains how a web-based initiative offers professional development to diverse groups of healthcare professionals

Abstract

Effective Practitioner is an educational initiative that supports nurses, midwives and allied health professionals to deliver person-centred, safe and effective care. It offers access to flexible work-based learning and development resources. This article describes the progress of the initiative and sets out the expected effects on service delivery, as well as exploring the Scottish context and the initiative’s relevance to the rest of the UK and abroad.

Keywords
Nursing, midwifery, allied health professions, career development, role development, person centredness, patient safety, clinical effectiveness

THE EFFECTIVE Practitioner education initiative is designed to help a range of healthcare professionals involved in direct patient care (Scottish Government Health Department 2010). Its development has been led by NHS Education for Scotland (NES) on behalf of the Scottish government supported by a national steering group. The initiative includes the provision of work-based learning resources, which are available from a dedicated website, and offers local support through existing and evolving practice education networks.

It is aimed at nurses, midwives and allied health professions (AHPs) at levels 5 and 6 of the career framework for health (Skills for Health 2010). This is a diverse group of professionals with wide-ranging experience, knowledge, skills and career aspirations. They play a critical role in the day-to-day delivery of direct care, and investing in them is an essential part of workforce development.

Work to develop Effective Practitioner included a literature search, policy review and activities, such as arranging focus groups and questionnaire-based surveys (NES 2010a, 2010b). Preparation identified the importance of involving practitioners and managers, but recognised that release from practice to access continuing professional development was often difficult.

Following the initial national consultation in January 2010, nominations were sought from interested practitioners working for NHS Scotland to ensure all professions in the target audience were represented on the user and electronic reference groups.

There was a strong message from these groups, which were involved from the outset, that the initiative should be ‘owned’ by practitioners, rather than be something they ‘had’ to do. Managers also wanted to know how their organisations would benefit and how they could help staff to be effective. These views were used to develop a product that met the needs of users and managers.

The preparatory work identified that practitioners wanted to:
- Manage their learning to ensure it is relevant to practice.
- Know how they and patients would benefit.
- Have a way to assess their effectiveness.
- Have access to flexible, accessible and interactive learning resources.
- Have a way to navigate their learning journeys and career development.
- Have help with personal development planning and review, as part of the NHS knowledge and skills framework, as well as help with maintaining registration and continuing professional development.

The learning resources can be accessed whenever users require them and are kept up to date. The information is provided in formats that can be downloaded so that managers and educators can pass materials to staff who do not have web access.
Resources are grouped under four headings:
- Clinical practice.
- Evidence in practice.
- Learning, teaching and supervision.
- Leadership and management.

There are sections on career and role development, and support with personal development planning, as well as links to learning materials, further information and tools. Sample forms accompanied by guidance enable those wishing to keep records of their learning activities to do so, and there is a section for managers and educators.

**Effects on practice**
The intended outcome of Effective Practitioner is to improve the patient experience, outcomes and care governance measures, and to ensure a supportive learning environment in which practitioners flourish and have job satisfaction (Box 1).

The support helps practitioners to keep up to date, access tools to assess their effectiveness, and integrate learning in their daily work as individuals or as teams. For example, during the initiative’s development phase, a new team of nurses, midwives and AHPs in a community hospital setting used the initiative to improve their care. They found the resources easy to use and relevant to practice, and they helped them to work as a team.

**Developments**
Now the initiative has been launched, more resources are being added to the website. These are being developed to ensure they meet the needs of practitioners and the service. The local NHS board infrastructure to support Effective Practitioner is also being developed as new practice educator roles are put in place across NHS Scotland, which are likely to bring benefits to individual staff and teams. This reflects that the initiative is close to practice, and that it is responsive, flexible and dynamic.

New educational resources, which are located on the website, will continue to be developed with the ongoing engagement and influence of practitioners and their managers, and then added to the site. This ensures the resources are contemporary and support professional development.

The diversity of the audience requires different approaches to learning, so Effective Practitioner will seek to address more specific needs. For example, some professionals prefer to use mobile technology and social media, while others prefer more traditional methods of access to learning, such as printed resources.

Evaluation of the initiative will be longitudinal. Preliminary assessment will establish how the resources are accessed and used, the level of support for the initiative and barriers to engagement. The assessment will also help identify gaps in the resource and the supporting infrastructure, which will inform further developments. In the longer term, evaluation will focus on the anticipated outcomes.

**Conclusion**
Effective Practitioner offers work-based learning resources and support for nurses, midwives and AHPs. This initiative responds to the healthcare priorities and quality agenda in Scotland, but the principle on which it is based can be applied to a wider UK and international audience.

The preparatory phase, which combines a review of the evidence, stakeholder engagement and the identification of practitioners’ preferences for content and delivery, is transferable to other organisations.

The involvement of practitioners ensures that they ‘own’ the learning and that it is relevant to them, their patients and clients.

**References**

**Expected outcomes of Effective Practitioner**
- Improving support for ongoing professional development of practitioners to ensure delivery of person-centred, safe and effective health care, delivered with dignity, respect and compassion.
- Contributing to meeting individual requirements for revalidation, and career progression in line with the NHS knowledge and skills framework.
- Maximising individuals’ contributions and responsibility to effective teamworking.
- Enhancing recruitment and retention, and ensuring that succession planning meets service needs.
- Engaging and empowering staff to implement effectively new and emerging methodologies, standards, guidance and policy directives.
- Enabling practitioners to demonstrate their personal contributions to improving care delivery.

Find out more
- Access the Effective Practitioner website at www.effectivepractitioner.nes.scot.nhs.uk