Evaluation and its importance for nursing practice

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Abstract
Evaluation of service delivery is an important aspect of nursing practice. Service evaluation is being increasingly used and led by nurses, who are well placed to evaluate service and practice delivery. This article defines evaluation of services and wider care delivery and its relevance in NHS practice and policy. It aims to encourage nurses to think about how evaluation of services or practice differs from research and audit activity and to consider why and how they should use evaluation in their practice. A process for planning and conducting an evaluation and disseminating findings is presented. Evaluation in the healthcare context can be a complicated activity and some of the potential challenges of evaluation are described, alongside possible solutions. Further resources and guidance on evaluation activity to support nurses’ ongoing development are identified.

Keywords
evaluation, evaluation planning and design, quality improvement, service delivery, service evaluation

Aims and intended learning outcomes
This article aims to encourage nurses to appreciate the importance of evaluation for nursing practice and to understand how evaluation of services and practice is conducted. It provides insights into how to plan an evaluation, and identifies some of the potential challenges that might arise and suggests how they might be overcome. After reading this article and completing the time out activities you should be able to:

» Discuss the importance of service and practice evaluation.
» Describe how evaluators can plan an evaluation.
» Identify some of the challenges associated with undertaking an evaluation in practice.
» Identify further resources and guidance to support evaluation activity.

Relevance to The Code
Nurses are encouraged to apply the four themes of The Code: Professional Standards of Practice and Behaviour for Nurses and Midwives to their professional practice (Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) 2015). The themes are: Prioritise people, Practise effectively, Preserve safety, and Promote professionalism and trust. This article relates to The Code in the following ways:

» It discusses the importance of service evaluation in healthcare to support an evidence-based approach to service or practice delivery, which promotes quality of care. The Code states that nurses must deliver care to the best of their abilities, on the basis of the best evidence available and best practice.
» It identifies a process for planning and conducting a service evaluation to ensure appropriate stakeholders are informed of, and involved in – where possible – the evaluation and any service redesign or change. This should lead to trust and confidence in the nursing profession from patients, service users, healthcare professionals and the public.
Nurses must work cooperatively to practise effectively. This article explores the need for nurses to work with colleagues, patients and service users to evaluate the quality of the care or service they provide.

Service evaluation involves the exploration of how a service is being delivered, including whether resources are being used in the most effective and efficient way. The Code states that nurses must identify priorities, manage time, staff and resources effectively, and deal with risk to ensure the quality of care or service they provide is maintained and improved.

**Introduction**

Evidence-based practice promotes the quality and cost-effectiveness of healthcare and should be based on the best available evidence and patient preference, and take account of clinical judgement (Schmidt and Brown 2011). Evaluation is important in healthcare because it supports an evidence-based approach to practice delivery (Moule et al 2017). It is used to assist in judging how well something is working. It can inform decisions about the effectiveness of a service and what changes could be considered to improve service delivery. While evaluation can be viewed as a subjective assessment made by individuals, it also refers to the use of a formalised or systematic process undertaken by healthcare practitioners, researchers or professional evaluators (Moule et al 2017).

More nurses are becoming involved in and leading evaluations (National Institute for Health Research 2017). Nurses are well placed to evaluate their services and practice, and to develop an evidence base for effective care delivery. Evaluation from an internal perspective is important in developing an evaluation skill base and promoting acceptance of evaluation evidence (Moule et al 2017). However, an external perspective might be perceived as more objective than an internal perspective. Therefore, ideally, a combination of internal and external evaluators may be considered (Conley-Tyler 2005).

The development of collaborative relationships between healthcare professionals, patients and carers, service users, the public and wider communities is considered essential to ensure the NHS is effective, and should be considered part of developing evidence-based practice (Seale 2016). To support the development of evidence-based practice, evaluation can be applied to review existing services or included as part of an implementation plan to judge the value of new services. For example, if a new service is being commissioned in the community, with the aim of trying to reduce hospital admissions, evaluation can be used to answer questions about how well the new service achieves that aim.

An increasing use of evaluation in healthcare reflects a requirement to provide evidence of the effectiveness of the NHS as a public-funded service (Department of Health (DH) and NHS Executive 1997). Healthcare providers need to ensure they are using resources in the most effective and efficient way and are working continuously to improve service delivery (DH 2010). Furthermore, the importance of undertaking real-time evaluation of new models of care delivery has been emphasised (NHS England et al 2014, Ham and Murray 2015). The range of polices encouraging evaluation activity as part of reviewing existing practice, and commissioning of new services, do so in a range of healthcare settings (DH 2011). Given that, and the growing emphasis on demonstrating effectiveness and efficiency, the authors are observing an increase in evaluation activity, which many nurses are both involved in and often lead.

**TIME OUT 1**

Think about whether there are any evaluation projects taking place in your practice area. Are there any projects focusing on current care delivery or is information being collected about how well a new service or practice is working?

**Defining evaluation**

One of the main challenges for nurses is to differentiate between evaluation, research and audit. In clinical practice, these terms are often used interchangeably; therefore, it is important to understand each method to ensure evaluation is appropriate.
There are similarities between evaluation, research and audit. They all start with a question, with the overall aim of influencing future practice. Evaluation, research and audit should include a systematic approach to collect, analyse and interpret data. However, they each have a different purpose and are situated in a different context as follows:

» Evaluations – these are specifically designed around the context of the service being evaluated, that is, they review, rigorously and systematically, care provision or an aspect of a care service (Humphries 2008). They review how well a service is meeting its aims and objectives. They do not try to produce generalisable data or new knowledge, and do not always need full NHS ethical approval from the National Research Ethics Service (NRES) of the Health Research Authority (Health Research Authority 2016).

» Research studies – these seek to extend or generate new knowledge and data, aiming to answer a clearly defined question, and require ethical approval (Moule 2015).

» Audits – these measure an aspect of practice against a recognised standard. They have become a routine part of healthcare to ensure current standards meet best practice. Audits require clinical governance but do not require full ethical approval (Brain et al 2011).

Evaluation can be defined as a systematic method to determine the effectiveness or efficiency of the service provided or an aspect of the service. It relies on the development of specific criteria on which to judge a service. The criteria may be from a variety of perspectives, such as those of service users, stakeholders and clinical teams.

TIME OUT 2
Define evaluation, research and audit in your own words and list the similarities and differences between the methods.

Using evaluation in practice
In the authors’ experience, evaluation of service delivery is often overlooked in practice. However, it is a crucial part of practice development and is a tool that all nurses should be aware of and able to use. With the increasing pressures on healthcare resources and services, all nurses, irrespective of banding and seniority, have a responsibility to review the nursing care they provide, beyond the evaluation of care provided to an individual patient or client. They should be able to undertake a wide evaluation of what they do to identify what is working and, therefore, what they should continue to do. They should also identify what is working less well and needs to change. Evaluation can be on a small scale in terms of an individual nurse, or small team of nurses, evaluating the care provided to patients.

Through disseminating evaluation findings, nurses can contribute to developing the evidence base. This may be particularly important in an area of nursing where the evidence base is weak or unclear, or where the service being evaluated is using a new approach. When reading evaluation findings, it is important to understand the context of the service or care being evaluated so that the relevance of the evaluation findings to the specific area can be assessed. Reading evaluation findings from other studies may enable nurses to think critically about their own practice area in considering alternative ways of developing practice.

TIME OUT 3
Consider the following scenarios and make a list of why it might be beneficial to evaluate these initiatives:

» Red trays have been introduced in the ward where you work to identify patients who require support with eating their meals.

» A new medication ordering system has been adopted in a care home to ensure medication does not run out.

Mixed methodologies and multiple data are often required when conducting a systematic evaluation, leading the evaluator to consider what data should be collected and why. For example, if you are evaluating a red tray initiative such as that described in Time out 3, you might need to: observe mealtimes to see what is happening; interview patients to learn from their experiences, as well as staff responsible for implementing and using the red tray scheme; and develop a questionnaire.
to obtain the views of families of patients who require a red tray.

The evaluation data might suggest that the red tray scheme improves safety and patient experience, because patients receive appropriate support with eating and drinking. However, it might also suggest that when ward occupancy is high, there might not always be enough red trays for all patients who require them, resulting in some patients not receiving the support they need. If these data are collected systematically and in accordance with research and ethical principles, they can inform how the red tray initiative should be developed to increase its effectiveness. Evaluation data can, therefore, demonstrate quality as well as inform continuous service or practice improvement.

TIME OUT 4
Think of an area of your practice or the service in which you work that might benefit from being evaluated. Which questions would you seek to answer? You might wish to discuss this with your colleagues.

Process of service evaluation
To complete an evaluation, a process such as that shown in Figure 1, can be used. The purpose of evaluation, as previously discussed, is to review and judge the efficiency and/or effectiveness of part or all of a service. The evaluation must be systematic, with relevant aims, objectives and methods, and findings should be disseminated.

Aims and objectives
To evaluate a service is to assess its merits and worth. Evaluation cannot be value-neutral, because there have to be aims and practices against which the evaluation is judged (Humphries 2008). Therefore, the aims should be specific to what the evaluation is aiming to assess.

Evaluation of services relies on the nurse developing specific criteria on which to judge a service, which may be from a variety of perspectives. Clinical area senior management might be interested in cost-effectiveness, while service users may be interested in how changes in the service will affect their experience and local provision. Therefore, it is important from the outset to understand what is being reviewed and the aims of the evaluation, which can be ascertained by asking the following questions:

» What is the area of evaluation? The initial stage is to determine the area that requires evaluation. You might be asked by your managers to evaluate the service or you may have an area of clinical care in which you are interested.

» Why does this area require evaluation? This may be because of a recent change or prospective change, or it may be that you can see potential for improvement.

» What do you want to review? This might include patients’ perspectives, cost-effectiveness of a service, or the role of the clinical team.

Once you have answered all three questions you have formulated your plan and can determine your aims. It is important the aims are not too broad, for example the pain management of people who have dementia, because this will lead to unrealistic expectations. Neither should they be too narrow because they will lack substance, and the importance of the evaluation will be compromised. Time and resources must be considered. There

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**Figure 1. Process of service evaluation**

- Define aims and objectives
- Involve relevant stakeholders
- Consider ethical and governance requirements and address them
- Agree the approach, design and data-collection tools
- Plan and conduct the evaluation
- Disseminate the evaluation findings
is little value in starting an evaluation and not having the time or access to the right people to achieve its aims.

**Involving patients, the public and other stakeholders**

At the beginning of an evaluation, as is the case for all real-time studies examining what is happening in practice, it is appropriate to identify the main stakeholders who should be involved (Robson and McCartan 2015). Stakeholders are people who are likely to have an interest in the service, or the part of the service, that is being evaluated. Identifying the stakeholders will enable you to determine at the outset the people you should talk to, and with whom you should engage.

Stakeholders might be service users, carers, staff, professionals and/or managers. Active stakeholder engagement will assist you in developing an effective and comprehensive evaluation, because each stakeholder will have a different perspective of what is most important to evaluate and why. If you take a collaborative approach in an evaluation, involving the local stakeholders, you will be increasingly likely to receive support in terms of the actual process of undertaking the evaluation. This is important because involvement can assist in gaining stakeholder support to implement changes identified through the evaluation findings (Moule et al 2016).

High-quality care is acknowledged as care that is safe and effective (Darzi 2008, NMC 2015) as well as person-centred, where patients are treated with ‘kindness, respect and compassion’ (NMC 2015). A central component in professional and high-quality healthcare is prioritising people and ensuring the service user is at the heart of everything that is done (Darzi 2008, NMC 2015). Therefore, if evaluation aims to provide an indication of how a service or an aspect of a service is functioning, it should include and listen to the service user’s voice (Staley 2009). Patients and the public, therefore, provide an important perspective, which cannot be sought from any other source. They know how it feels to use the service, in other words, to experience it. Nurses should aim to provide effective care. Without inclusion of service users, they will not be able to evaluate truly the care they are providing, because they will only have part of the picture.

**Ethics and governance**

Evaluation projects will not necessarily require ethical approval. However, in some circumstances, ethical approval may be sought from the NRES of the Health Research Authority. The Health Research Authority (2016) provides guidance to determine whether ethical approval is required. The general principles are that a project meeting any of the following criteria will require ethical approval (Moule et al 2017):

- There is some randomisation of the study group, that is, patients can be allocated to a control and experimental group, who receive different treatments.
- There will be a change in the normal treatment delivered, that is, there is a new treatment being planned as part of a protocol.
- The data and knowledge that will be developed in the project will be generalisable, that is, they will be applicable to the population at large.

If ethical approval is required, a plan of the study (protocol) and information for the participants explaining their involvement in the study and any risk, will be required. The NRES committee will also request to see consent forms used to gain permission from the public in relation to study involvement. Often, a local research governance office will guide people through this process.

Evaluation of service improvement and evaluation that does not meet the aforementioned principles would not normally require NRES approval. However, the evaluators may seek approval from an academic institution, such as a university ethics committee. While this is not a requirement, it can be seen as best
practice. Evaluators might also provide project information for participants and gain informed consent.

Even though NRES approval might not be required, if an evaluation is being conducted in a health service setting, there may be a requirement for research governance approval. The local governance office can advise on this area. Notification of the project and a project plan might be required, and will be reviewed by the local governance office before providing access to any data. Research governance applies to everyone undertaking clinical research and includes a set of standards to safeguard research participants and ensure ethical principles are used (Moule et al 2017).

**Answering the evaluation question**

Evaluation uses many of the tools and techniques that are adopted in other types of research to answer questions about need, efficiency, effectiveness, appropriateness and acceptability of a service (Moule et al 2017). Evaluation can be designed using qualitative or quantitative methods, depending on the questions being asked and the type of data that will be generated. Qualitative evaluation tends to focus on language, perceptions and experiences to understand and explain behaviour. Quantitative evaluation generates data that can be analysed numerically using statistical techniques (Moule et al 2017).

There may be instances where it is appropriate to use both approaches. This type of evaluation is known as mixed-method research. Advocates of mixed-method research suggest that researchers should seek to use as many methodological perspectives as possible when investigating an issue or topic (Bryman 1998, Denzin 2009). In this way, qualitative and quantitative findings can be viewed alongside each other and the evaluator can obtain a more rounded picture of the situation. Many nursing questions can be answered using a mixed-method approach, such as: ‘How well is the service functioning?’ The evaluation might include some data collection about staff and patient experience as well as quantitative outcome data in relation to recovery rates.

The data can be collected using a variety of research techniques, including interviews, focus groups, questionnaires and literature reviews (Moule et al 2017). Using these techniques will require appropriate skills and expertise. Initially, developing skills in this area may seem daunting and nurses may choose to seek additional support and training. However, many nurses have gained some of the skills required from their clinical practice.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Challenge</th>
<th>Possible solution</th>
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<tr>
<td>Various approaches to evaluation may initially seem confusing and daunting to an inexperienced evaluator</td>
<td>Remember the premise that a successful evaluation is one that uses appropriate ethical approaches and methodologies. Additionally, there are several resources being developed to assist you, which are identified in the ‘Resources to support evaluation activity’ section in this article.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Long-term goals can be challenging to measure</td>
<td>Start on a small scale and focus on an area of practice that you can influence. For example, if you are a nurse working in a nursing home, you might want to evaluate how information is communicated in the nursing team.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Service provision is often complex, and it can be challenging to distinguish boundaries or scope of the evaluation</td>
<td>Have a clear aim and well-defined objectives at the outset of the evaluation so that you are clear about what you are evaluating and why. The inclusion of stakeholders is important to support you to maintain focus.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The evaluation team may not have sufficient expertise or experience</td>
<td>Seek support from local research and development departments and attempt to identify a mentor in your clinical practice area. There are several online resources available to support you, which are identified in the ‘Resources to support evaluation activity’ section in this article. Also, attempt to start on a small scale. Include stakeholders at the outset to ensure they are aware of the value of the evaluation and support it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conducting the evaluation alongside clinical responsibilities may be challenging</td>
<td>Speak to your manager and team at the planning stage of the evaluation to ensure the evaluation is realistic, has an appropriate timeframe and that resources are planned for.</td>
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practice. Nurses draw on several different data sources in their daily practice to assist them to make judgements. For example, when assessing a patient, the nurse will take quantitative assessments such as blood pressure and temperature, use observational skills to monitor the patient and interview skills in their assessments. Such skills can be transferred and used to collect data in an evaluation project.

**Challenges and sensitivities surrounding planning and conducting evaluations in practice, and disseminating findings**

Conducting an evaluation can be complex and challenges to evaluating practice may be experienced. Challenges may involve the setting and clarifying of aims and objectives, selecting the appropriate research design and dissemination of findings (Moule et al 2016). Table 1 summarises some of the challenges that may be encountered when planning and conducting an evaluation, and disseminating findings, and possible solutions.

Many of the challenges described in Table 1 can be avoided or their effect reduced through planning and ensuring that a clear protocol is in place at the outset of the evaluation. The protocol should be followed throughout the evaluation to ensure the project is completed on time and within any resource or budget constraints. Considering challenges at the onset and creating plans to avoid or minimise them can ensure the evaluation is not unduly disrupted. Involving stakeholders at appropriate stages can reduce local concern and resistance, increase support for the evaluation and create a team approach, which aids successful evaluation (Moule et al 2016). Table 2 identifies potential challenges that can be encountered with stakeholders when planning and conducting an evaluation, and possible solutions.

**TIME OUT 6**

Using the example of an evaluation you identified in Time out 4, what challenges might you experience? Think about the possible effect of these challenges on the evaluation and write a brief action plan to minimise potential challenges.

**TIME OUT 7**

Identify five reasons why is it important to disseminate the findings of an evaluation. Share this information with your colleagues and seek their views to enhance your knowledge.

**Dissemination of evaluation findings**

Dissemination is a vital part of evaluation (Moule et al 2017). The evaluation findings should be disseminated in a way that is accessible to the audience, for example by using language that is simple and understandable. It is important that findings and recommendations for practice change are communicated to those directly involved in the evaluation and those who have the authority to act on the findings. Sometimes evaluation findings identify the need for practice change and result in changes to services that may not be popular and can have an effect on service users, staff and the public. Such findings

<table>
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<td>Staff may feel threatened when the service or care they provide is being evaluated</td>
<td>Engage in partnership working with staff and ensure they are aware of the purpose of the evaluation to reduce concerns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff may be resistant to the evaluation and restrict evaluators’ access to the necessary data, service users or staff</td>
<td>Ensure clear plans are in place and the roles and responsibilities of staff are defined at the outset. Ensure staff are involved in and aware of the purpose of the evaluation to reduce tension or concerns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service users may be resistant to the evaluation</td>
<td>Engage in partnership working with service users and ensure they are aware of the purpose, progress and findings of the evaluation, and are involved in any service redesign or change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If the evaluation is externally funded, the funding body may have unrealistic expectations about what the evaluation can achieve</td>
<td>Engage in thorough discussions with all stakeholders at the planning stage of the evaluation. Identify stakeholders’ expectations in relation to what can be achieved, in what timeframe and at what cost, to avoid misunderstandings, frustrations and disappointments during the evaluation</td>
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need to be disseminated sensitively to reduce any negative effects and increase understanding of the need for change.

Resources to support evaluation activity

Given the emphasis on evaluation in healthcare, there are an increasing number of resources and materials being developed that may be beneficial when planning and conducting a service evaluation, and disseminating findings, including:

» Avon Primary Care Research Collaborative (APCRC) (www.apcrc.nhs.uk/evaluation/toolkit.htm) – provides a toolkit to support evaluation activity.

» Collaboration for Leadership in Applied Health Research and Care West (CLAHRC West) (http://clahrc-west.nihr.ac.uk/evaluation) – offers information and training in evaluation as well as linking to appropriate resources.

» Health Research Authority (www.hra.nhs.uk/research-community/before-you-apply/determine-whether-your-study-is-research) – provides the Research Governance Frameworks for Health and Social Care.

» The Health Foundation (www.health.org.uk) – an independent charity that aims to improve the quality of healthcare in the UK through the provision of information about quality improvement and service evaluation.

» West of England Academic Health Science Network (www.weahsn.net/what-we-do/using-evidence-based-healthcare/evaluation-for-a-qi-project) – provides three short videos summarising the benefits of planning and conducting evaluation for quality improvement.

Conclusion

Evaluation plays a central role in the commissioning of services and is required to maintain evidence-based and resource-effective practice. Nurses involved in local evaluations are developing skills and expertise in service evaluation. Nurses should have knowledge of what evaluation is, why it is important, how it is planned and conducted, and the challenges associated with evaluation activity in healthcare settings.

TIME OUT 8

Nurses are encouraged to apply the four themes of The Code (NMC 2015) to their professional practice. Consider how planning and conducting a service evaluation relates to The Code.

TIME OUT 9

Now that you have completed the article you might like to write a reflective account as part of your revalidation.

References


Service evaluation
TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE BY COMPLETING SELF-ASSESSMENT QUESTIONNAIRE 891

1. Evidence-based practice should consider:
   a) Best available evidence  [ ]
   b) Patient preference  [ ]
   c) Clinical judgement  [ ]
   d) All of the above  [ ]

2. The main aim of an evaluation project is to:
   a) Produce generalisable data  [ ]
   b) Review how well a service is meeting its aims and objectives  [ ]
   c) Measure practice against a recognised standard  [ ]
   d) Produce new knowledge  [ ]

3. Which statement is true?
   a) Service evaluation is value-neutral  [ ]
   b) Service evaluation always requires NHS ethical approval  [ ]
   c) There are no similarities between evaluation, research and audit  [ ]
   d) Service evaluation must be systematic, with relevant aims, objectives and methods  [ ]

4. Ethical approval for an evaluation project is required if:
   a) There is some randomisation of the study group  [ ]
   b) Data generated is not applicable to the population at large  [ ]
   c) There will be no change in the normal treatment delivered  [ ]
   d) Patients are to be allocated to a control and experimental group  [ ]

5. Ethical approval for an evaluation project may be sought from:
   a) The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence  [ ]
   b) The National Research Ethics Service  [ ]
   c) The Ethics Research Authority  [ ]
   d) The Research Ethics Committee  [ ]

6. What is the focus of quantitative evaluation?
   a) Language  [ ]
   b) Perception  [ ]
   c) Analysis of numerical data using statistical techniques  [ ]
   d) Experience  [ ]

7. Effective planning of a service evaluation includes consideration of:
   a) Appropriate ethical approaches and methodologies  [ ]
   b) A clear aim and well-defined objectives  [ ]
   c) Inclusion of patients, the public and other stakeholders  [ ]
   d) All of the above  [ ]

8. Which statement is true?
   a) Nurses should not lead service evaluations  [ ]
   b) Nurses are well placed to evaluate their services and practice  [ ]
   c) Only senior nurses have a responsibility to review the nursing care they provide  [ ]
   d) Fewer nurses are becoming involved in and leading service evaluations  [ ]

9. Research governance:
   a) Includes standards to safeguard research participants  [ ]
   b) Does not apply to clinical research projects  [ ]
   c) Does not enhance the quality of research  [ ]
   d) Does not consider ethical issues  [ ]

10. Mixed-method research involves:
    a) Statistical analysis only  [ ]
    b) Analysis of experience only  [ ]
    c) Randomised controlled trials only  [ ]
    d) Qualitative and quantitative data analysis  [ ]

How to complete this assessment
This self-assessment questionnaire will help you to test your knowledge. It comprises ten multiple choice questions that are broadly linked to the article starting on page 55. There is one correct answer to each question.

- You can test your subject knowledge by attempting the questions before reading the article, and then go back over them to see if you would answer any differently.
- You might like to read the article before trying the questions. The correct answers will be published in Nursing Standard on 10 May.

Subscribers making use of their RCNi Portfolio can complete this and other questionnaires online and save the result automatically. Alternatively, you can cut out this page and add it to your professional portfolio. Don’t forget to record the amount of time taken to complete it.

You may want to write a reflective account based on what you have learned. Visit journals.rcni.com/reflective-account

This self-assessment questionnaire was compiled by Tanya Fernandes

The answers to this questionnaire will be published on 10 May

Answers to SAQ 889 on discussing risk with patients, which appeared in the 12 April issue, are:

1. d  2. c  3. a  4. d  5. b  6. a  7. a  8. c  9. b  10. d