Patient care + student supervision = a daunting juggling act

How to support students’ learning on clinical placement while managing the day in, day out pressures of patient care – three registrants share their advice

For an overworked nurse on a busy shift, supervising a student may feel like yet another pressure to handle.

But, as the Nursing and Midwifery Council’s (NMC) code and standards make clear, every registrant has a responsibility to support students in their learning.

Indeed, teams are likely to have to oversee more students, as NHS England’s Long Term Workforce Plan proposes a near doubling of nurse training places by 2031.

A constructive experience

The key to making the experience a positive one for nurses and students is a positive and constructive approach, says senior sister Erin Neil, who works on the hepato-pancreato-biliary ward at the Freeman Hospital, part of Newcastle Upon Tyne Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust.

‘We’re a team that thrives with students and have always dedicated a lot of time to them,’ says Ms Neil, who qualified in 2012 and had a second-year placement on the ward where she now works. Over a year, the ward takes around 40 students, who may be in the first, second or third year of their studies.
‘Our culture is we enjoy it and we’re very aware how important it is to give them a good experience. We’re training the next generation.’

Time pressures can present a challenge, Ms Neil admits. ‘A lot of us have aspirations about the kind of practice supervisors and assessors we want to be, but sometimes workload and time constraints get in the way,’ says Ms Neil.

Preparation is important, with both supervisors and assessors usually allocated to students around four months before they arrive.

‘A lot of students’ anxiety comes around the unknown, so the more we can plan, the better,’ she says.

Nursing students receive a welcome pack before they arrive at senior sister Emma Shepherd’s gastroenterology ward at the Royal Victoria Infirmary, also in Newcastle-Upon-Tyne. Becoming a practice supervisor or assessor is viewed as an integral aspect of the nursing role on the ward, she says.

‘I encourage it,’ she says. ‘And staff find it rewarding, especially when students come back on bank shifts or say they want to work here. It makes you feel you’ve done a good job.’

> Communication

If, for any reason, preparation for a student placement has not been ideal, communication is vital. She recommends a quick chat between supervisor and student at the beginning of a shift to identify priorities of care for the day and how the students can support that.

‘Ask the student to identify learning needs for the day and how they can achieve them,’ says Ms Shepherd. ‘Be honest, be kind and be realistic. Clear expectations from both supervisor and student are important.’

Although she only qualified in September 2022, paediatric nurse Leanne Bettis was keen to become involved in supervising students as soon as she could.

‘As a student, I had many placements where I’d turn up for a shift and the person there wasn’t expecting me. They had to think on their feet about how to organise their work, as well as support a student,’ recalls Ms Bettis, who works at Basingstoke and North Hampshire Hospital.

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> What do practice supervisors and assessors do and how do I become one?

Students on placement will have multiple practice supervisors and a practice assessor.

**Practice supervisors**

A practice supervisor supports and supervises students learning in the practice learning environment. Any registered nurse – indeed any registered health and social care professional – can be a supervisor, although according to the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) they should have ‘been prepared and supported to take up their role and have up-to-date knowledge and experience relevant to the student they are supervising’. This may involve some training through the nurse’s employer.

**Practice assessors**

As a practice assessor, nurses must meet standards set out by the NMC and, while the council does not mandate specific training for the role, those undertaking it ‘must have some form of preparation’ to ensure they meet these outcomes. In reality, this is likely to involve more substantial training and for some will take the form of a university-accredited course, although this is not always the case. The NMC states assessors should ‘receive ongoing support and training to reflect and develop in their role’.

An assessor’s role is to assess and confirm the student’s achievement of practice learning for a placement or a series of placements, according to the NMC, and they may also liaise with the student’s academic institution.

The NMC’s Standards for Student Supervision and Assessment hub has more information on the roles and guidance for nurses.

‘Roles can renew your love of nursing’

Senior sister Erin Neil, of the Freeman Hospital, Newcastle-Upon-Tyne, says: ‘Being a supervisor or assessor gives a renewed love of what you do. It’s also a reminder of how much knowledge you have, boosting your confidence, especially when you’ve been in the job for a while and can forget how much you know.’

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Don’t panic: tips for supervising student placements during busy shifts

In an ideal world, all nursing student placements would be well planned – but in reality, this sometimes is not possible. Many nurses will be familiar with the situation of arriving at work for a busy shift to discover that they are expected to supervise a student that day – without having had any warning.

Don’t panic, says senior sister Erin Neil, of the Freeman Hospital, Newcastle-Upon-Tyne. ‘Good experiences can still happen ad hoc, and workload pressures are ever increasing, but it’s important to be upfront and honest with what we are capable of providing.’

» Remember kindness ‘This will often go a long way even when we are busy and stressed,’ says Ms Neil. ‘Even if we have minimal time, allowing the student to directly shadow us in everything that we do is useful’

» Students want learning to matter ‘This can be something as simple as a wound dressing or being allowed to supervise a medication round. They don’t often want to move mountains, just simple small tasks can mean a lot’

» Ask for help ‘If a week is particularly busy, ask other members of the multidisciplinary team to take the student for a day’s learning,’ says Ms Neil. ‘For example, arranging a day in theatre to watch a surgery, or going round with the colorectal specialist nurses for stoma practice. This alleviates stress from the staff nurse for that shift, and is actually good for development. It takes a village to train a nurse’

» Spend time teaching one clinical skill at a time and allowing scope for independent practice, says Ms Neil. ‘For example, showing the student how to perform vital observations – this takes only 15 minutes of education and you can then set the student off doing a full bay of patients’ vital observations independently’

‘Staff can be very stressed and suddenly, with no notice, they have a student. Some aren’t good at hiding their feelings. I can understand how they feel, but it’s important to try and smile, have a positive outlook’

Ella Venn, adult nursing student, University of West of England

Students can thrive if the workplace culture is one where staff enjoy boasting them

Venn suggests. ‘It can help to discuss different learning styles and what someone prefers,’ she says. For example, some learn most through reading and writing, while others appreciate a hands-on approach.

Individually tailored learning ‘If there’s time, you can try and tailor learning towards that student. It’s a great way to show you’re interested and ready to accommodate their needs.’

Ultimately approaching the student as an individual, rather than simply going through a tick-box exercise, is crucial to success, Ms Venn believes.

‘You can tell those assessors and supervisors who’ve observed you and looked at your strengths and weaknesses, writing comments that are personal to you, rather than generic statements,’ she says. ‘You feel like they’re interested in your development.’