Supervision and keeping the relationship positive

Registered staff in a supervisor role need as much support as students to ensure the best practice learning environment and avoid interpersonal pitfalls.

Changes to the way nursing students are supervised when on clinical placements have meant a greater number of nurses can expect to take on the role.

Updated Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) standards for supervision and assessment came into force in 2019, setting out expectations for the learning, support and supervision of nursing students in the practice environment. Previously, students would be assigned a mentor with specific university-level training; the new system – where students have practice supervisors, a practice assessor and an academic assessor – is much less prescriptive.

When supervision works well, it is a hugely important part of the education of future nurses. But when the relationship breaks down, or becomes inappropriate, it can be devastating, not just for individuals, but for the supply of students into the nurse workforce too.

Recently, the NMC’s fitness to practise panel ruled on a case that demonstrated what can happen when the relationship – albeit in this case between a mentor and mentee – goes wrong (see box).

Role models

The regulator says ‘all NMC-registered nurses, midwives and nursing associates are capable of supervising students, serving as role models for safe and effective practice’.

But how do they get it right – and what should students do if it goes wrong?

It is relatively early days of supervision, and despite a wealth of information from the NMC, some people still use the old terminology.

University of Central Lancashire deputy head of school (preregistration nursing education) Tyler Warburton says: ‘Mentor isn’t a term that we’re meant to use any more, but a lot of people still do. When we had mentors, they had to do a very specific mentorship programme, generally a university module, and it was really clear what was expected of those individuals. It was tightly controlled and tightly regulated.

‘But when they got rid of that system, and brought in a system where students have a practice supervisor and a practice assessor, they removed the need for preparation for those roles to be a university-based programme.’

Clarity and expectations

Mr Warburton has some concerns about how well nursing students – and staff – understand how the new roles fit together.

‘Students find the supervisor told them they would be a mentor, and that’s what they thought they were. They didn’t have the heads up, they didn’t know about the new system, and that’s concerning.’

Sexual harassment on clinical placement

Earlier this year, a nurse was suspended from the register for six months when a Nursing and Midwifery Council fitness to practise panel found that he had sexually harassed a nursing student.

The nurse had made inappropriate comments about oral sex, later claiming they had been banter.

The student in question left the programme. He had been on placement in May 2018, and the nurse was acting as his mentor when he made the remarks.

The panel heard that the student sought advice from relatives and an RCN representative, and returned to placement, but said that the nurse made a further sexually suggestive comment that left him ‘speechless’.

The panel found the registrant’s actions to have been serious and deplorable, and that they had created an intimidating and hostile environment for the student.

The panel also said that as a mentor where there was a considerable age gap, he should have provided the student with nurturing and guidance.
versus assessor role slightly confusing because there are certain things that assessors can do that supervisors can’t – they can sometimes find it difficult to know who can sign things off for them and things like that. I also think the practice staff find it confusing.

‘It’s not unusual for students who have had a particularly bad placement with their practice support staff to come back to the university and say they want to quit.’

Sometimes practice support staff don’t recognise the influence they have on students – for good or bad, he believes.

‘I’m not saying they don’t care, but it’s the nature of the job they’re doing and how much pressure they are under. But when they go well, they are absolutely phenomenal.’

Queen’s Nursing Institute director of nursing programmes (leadership) Sharon Aldridge-Bent has some concerns about how well the new roles of practice supervisor, practice assessor and academic assessor have been explained, and work together.

‘Having taught mentorship for a long time, I always felt mentors had a dual role. On the one hand they were supposed to nurture and support and do assessment in practice. But if something went wrong, they were also the person who had to pick up the pieces, or to pull someone up about something.’

But the new structure creates more of a separation of these roles, which is potentially a good thing, she says. ‘It’s a professional relationship, not a friendship. You’re there to be a “critical friend”, but not to cross the boundary into being a friendship. It’s an enabling and empowering relationship that’s meant to be about learning.’

Challenges for staff

The level of preparation that practice staff receive to fulfil supervision or assessor roles varies – and not everyone is a ‘born’, to it, Ms Aldridge-Bent says. There are other challenges

NMC requirements for an effective practice learning environment

All nursing students must spend 2,300 hours in clinical placement under supervision.

This involves practice supervision, a nominated practice assessor for practice placements, and a different nominated academic assessor for each part of the academic programme.

The Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) says education institutions and practice learning partners, must ensure:

» All students are supervised by registered nurses, midwives, nursing associates or other registered health and social care professionals
» Support and oversight of practice supervision
» Supervision level reflects students’ learning needs
» Practice supervision guarantees safe and effective learning experiences
» Coordination and continuity of support and supervision, and that practice supervision enables independent learning

Source: NMC – tinyurl.com/NMC-supervision-standards

‘This is a professional relationship. You’re there to be a critical friend, but not to cross the boundary into friendship’
Sharon Aldridge-Bent, director of nursing programmes (leadership), Queen’s Nursing Institute
too, such as the time that supervisors can give to the task.

RCN professional lead for nursing students Rachel Wood says: ‘We’ve got a significant staffing crisis. Where you don’t have enough staff, something’s got to give, and often that’s the ability of staff in the placement to be able to offer adequate supervision and protected time for students for assessment.’

Students really benefit from a supernumerary placement where – as is supposed to happen – they are not treated as part of the nursing ‘numbers’, adds Ms Wood.

This means they can plan their learning and development and seek out experiences they need in order to meet their competencies.

### How to create the best clinical placement experience

Tyler Warburton from University of Central Lancashire advises:

- **Set the boundaries early** Open, honest conversations allow the student to know what they can expect from the placement and you, and what is expected of them. This is where students could share what they have done so far on the course and any objectives they need to complete during this placement.

- **Use open and non-judgemental language** If a student has particular challenges, for example with their own caring responsibilities, discuss possible reasonable adjustments. Safety of the ward and service users comes first, so the student will need to be present from the start of shift to receive a full handover.

- **Things students will have to do to optimise learning** Normally these will include working unsocial hours and participating in the full 24-hour cycle of care.

- **Avoid using forceful or demanding language** Demonstrate mutual respect.

- **Remember** Be friendly, but remain professional.

- **Learning is mutual** Students should expect to learn, but practice supervisors should be open to learning too.

- **Steps to take if the student has concerns** Ensure they know what to do if they are unhappy with the relationship or the placement and how to escalate concerns in a respectful and professional way.

- **Feedback** Should be viewed as supportive, not be taken as a personal attack – no matter how difficult the discussion might be.

### If a student is concerned

Placement providers have a responsibility to offer the best possible learning environment, which benefits staff as well as students. But if the placement isn’t working for students, or if the relationship between them and their supervisors or assessors is causing concern, then they need to know what to do.

Students with concerns about relationships with practice supervisors should first raise them with their assessor, but if they feel they can’t do that, they should take it to their university assessor or personal tutor, she says.

‘RCN members can also contact us,’ says Ms Wood. ‘If there’s a problem with the relationship it’s important that it’s identified early.

‘It’s important that you respect the person offering the supervision, and that you recognise the quality of their practice, because then you have something to learn from them. You don’t have to like them.’

### Supportive environment

Recent Liverpool John Moores University nursing graduate James Savage is the RCN student representative for north west England.

He had a positive placement experience as a student in acute mental health at Mersey Care NHS Foundation Trust and has just taken a staff nurse job there.

‘I had excellent support from my practice assessor and from one of the managers in my first placement in the acute mental health ward.

‘There was such a supportive atmosphere as a student and that made me feel I’d be supported as a newly qualified nurse.’

### Supernumerary status

In his role as an RCN student representative, Mr Savage is aware that not everyone has such positive experiences.

He feels COVID-19 staffing contingency measures have resulted in new challenges, including confusion about students’ status. This was because they were part of the numbers when deployed in the pandemic response, but then supposed to revert to being supernumerary.

‘It made it difficult and it confused people – we need to work towards making sure that people realise students are supernumerary and they need to have that protected time for learning, engagement and supervision.’

### Further information

- NMC Standards for student supervision and assessment
  - tinyurl.com/NMC-supervision-standards