Practice supervisors: what do they do?

Designed to support students’ development, the role can also enhance your practice as a registered nurse or nursing associate.

Practice supervisors support and supervise nursing students in their practice learning environment and were introduced with the Nursing and Midwifery Council’s (NMC) education standards in 2018. The role is for registered staff, so is open to any nurse or nursing associate in any practice learning environment.

Every NMC registrant has a responsibility to support students and as University of Hertfordshire principal lecturer and professional lead for mental health Greg Rooney explains: ‘It’s a professional obligation that you should be taking seriously.’

Practice supervisors are often the go-to person for the student, says Mr Rooney. ‘And students often spend more time with their practice supervisor than their assessor,’ he adds.

What does a practice supervisor do?

Supervision can be provided in different ways, says the NMC, with practice supervisors able to judge the kind of support they provide. Factors to consider include protecting the public and the student’s learning needs – their competence and achieving the outcomes required.

‘It’s important that supervisors and assessors are working together to help the student optimise their learning experience,’ says University of Nottingham assistant professor and year-two nursing lead Elizabeth Williams.

‘Students won’t always know what the opportunities are in a particular placement, unless they’re highlighted,’ she says.

What education and training is required?

While practice supervisors must be prepared by Lynne Pearce health journalist

Tips for supervising students

» Show empathy ‘Place yourself in the shoes of the student,’ says principal lecturer and professional lead for mental health Greg Rooney. ‘Students don’t get a bursary, the cost of living crisis has really affected them and I’d hazard a guess that 90%-plus are doing bank shifts or other work because they have no income. Understanding these challenges is important’

» Remember what it was like when you were a student, says newly registered nurse Leanne Bettis. Whether you had a positive or negative experience with your practice supervisors, use it to shape the way you approach the role, she says, replicating what worked and avoiding what didn’t

» Give constructive feedback and positive reinforcement, says assistant professor Elizabeth Williams. ‘And allow time for reflection. It’s often undervalued’

» Seek support if you need it ‘Whether you need help with an iPad or a tricky student, there is lots around,’ says assistant professor in nursing Liz Charalambous. Look after yourself too, she says. ‘Emotional labour can take its toll’

What qualities and skills do you need for the role?

Approachability, supportiveness and an understanding of how students learn, says Ms Williams. ‘You also need a degree of experience and to be willing to share your knowledge. Be honest with students too – and that can mean having difficult conversations if the student isn’t achieving at the expected level,’ she says.

Tricky discussions may be especially difficult for those who are less experienced. Ms Williams recommends using the SPIKES model, often used for presenting distressing information to patients and families. SPIKES stands for setting, perception, invitation or information, knowledge, empathy, and summary or strategy.

‘I like to practise, planning what I’m going to say,’ says Ms Williams. ‘It’s about asking the student how they’re feeling too, and identifying anything they’re unhappy with.’

‘We have difficult conversations with patients and colleagues in many settings, and it’s something we get better at doing as we gain experience. You’re not helping the student, yourself or nursing by not having these conversations.’

It’s also useful to point students towards the NMC code. ‘That’s our bible,’ says Liz Charalambous, assistant professor in nursing at the University of Nottingham. ‘You can say “these are the standards we expect you to work towards”.’

By Lynne Pearce health journalist

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‘You need a degree of experience and to be willing to share your knowledge. You need to be honest with students too’
Elizabeth Williams, assistant professor at the University of Nottingham

before supervising students, that doesn’t necessarily mean formal training, says the NMC. Support, education or training should be tailored, depending on the practice supervisor’s experience and current learning needs, and the learning needs and programme outcomes of their students.

The approved educational institution, alongside its practice learning partners, is responsible for ensuring the right support, education and training is provided. ‘There’s an expectation that training happens, but it’s up to individual organisations to design it themselves,’ says Mr Rooney. ‘There’s a certain rationale to support that argument, which is one size doesn’t necessarily fit all.’

In reality, much depends on the availability of resources, he adds, with some organisations investing in preparation and support, while others offer much less.

What are the main challenges in the role?
Staff shortages are a continuing issue. ‘It’s a pressurised role because you have to deliver clinically, making sure your patients are safe and well cared for, but you also have an extra layer of responsibility in training up the next generation of nurses,’ says Dr Charalambous. To do the role well, you need protected time, she adds. ‘It’s no good piling jobs on your team without the resources.’

Mr Rooney says: ‘Given the last few years, I take my hat off to practice supervisors and assessors. They’re doing a brilliant job and universities really value them. They’ve had so many demands on them, but they’re still able to take the time to support students, and that’s amazing.’

How can the role enhance your career?
‘The role helps people develop their skills in supporting learning and ultimately improving patient care,’ says Mr Rooney. ‘It should help you to think, this is how I’m supporting patient care, particularly in the future – by growing a new workforce.’

Practice supervisors also learn from their students, he says. ‘I’ve lost count of the number of times registrants say, “I like having students because it keeps me on my toes with the latest research”.’

‘When I had students, it made me realise I had to understand why we did something or a decision was made. It’s something you can forget to do when you’re busy or working in hierarchical organisations.’

For Ms Williams, seeing students progress can boost your confidence. ‘You can see their development and know that’s partly down to what you’ve done,’ she says.

‘It’s something you can add to your CV, using the experience in areas such as problem-solving and goal-setting.’

Further information

I want to make sure the students on my unit have the same good experience

For newly registered nurse Leanne Bettis, positive experience of practice supervision when she was a student has shaped her approach to taking on the role herself.

‘I really enjoyed being a student and learning from others,’ says Ms Bettis, who qualified in September 2022 and is now a children’s nurse at Basingstoke and North Hampshire Hospital. ‘As a registered nurse, I wanted to make sure the students on my unit had the same good experience.’

She particularly enjoys supervising third-year nursing students, where she encourages them to have direct patient contact while she stays in the background.

‘It gives them the sense of what real life will be like for them in a couple of months,’ says Ms Bettis. ‘I’m not constantly looking over their shoulders, but there’s a safety net, so if they’re unsure of anything, I’m there. You have to find a balance.’

As a student, above everything she wanted her practice supervisors to listen. ‘Now I try to find out from students what they think they know, by asking questions,’ she says. ‘Then I can gauge the help I give, building on the skills and knowledge they have already.’

She believes the role has enhanced her own practice. ‘I’m always thinking about how I would explain what I’m doing to a student, in a way they’d understand it,’ says Ms Bettis.