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An Evaluation of the Assessment of Practice; How do mentors (Assessors) in Practice Areas Reach Judgments about Student Nurse Capability?

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In the UK Mentors in the practice arena undertake a number of essential roles concerning the learning and professional development of student nurses, one of these being the assessment of their ability, safety and fitness to practice. Although the mentorship of students is often portrayed as an effective mechanism for practice learning most studies concentrate on the support aspects of the role (Andrews and Roberts 2003) rather than assessment. However as Crossley, Humphris and Jolly (2002) posit good professional regulation depends on good assessment and high quality procedures for assessing professional performance, indeed the recently implemented Nursing and Midwifery Council Standards support such learning and assessment in practice (NMC 2007). Nevertheless, the findings of Doggett (2004) were that while mentors were doing well in some aspects of assessment, there were significant problems reported by a number of assessors. Five years on from this work, nursing education in the UK has seen a number of changes and is currently undergoing a government review, but have these had any impact on the assessment of practice from the assessor's perspective in practice or indeed made any difference to the reliability and validity of the decisions made by these assessors who make an important contribution to nursing education? It was timely to further explore and evaluate the current situation with regard to the adequacy of the assessment of practice and in particular how decisions and judgements are reached about the achievements or not of student nurses from the assessors' viewpoint. Thus, this paper focuses on that role in such assessment through the eyes of assessors representative here of three major health trusts in the UK. Reported are the main findings of an evaluation of how mentors make decisions about the capability of student nurses in practice and although showing that that the situation has improved in 2009 questions still remain about the reliability of some aspects of decision making. Provided are recommendations from the evaluators and practitioners themselves of how individuals who are first and foremost nurses in practice can be better prepared and supported in this vital role as key players in judging whether or not students are fit to practice and enter the professional register, through sound decision making. While the presenters do not claim to have all the answers, they highlight important issues for those nurses involved in the education and support of student nurses.