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Relationships between university and practice, and the role of the link lecturer

Mentorship: is the fourteenth series of 'Midwifery basics' targeted at practising midwives. It aims to provide information to raise awareness of the impact of the work of midwives on student learning and ultimately on women's experience and encourage midwives to seek further information through a series of activities. In this fifth article Pat Jones and Joyce Marshall consider the relationships between university and practice, and the role of the link lecturer in supporting mentors and students. Midwives are encouraged to seek further information through a series of activities.

Scenario

James is mentoring Rachel a third year student midwife during a seven week placement on the postnatal ward. He is aware that at the end of this placement he will be responsible for grading Rachel's practice. They are soon to have an intermediate review meeting to discuss Rachel's progress so far. During weekly feedback James has discussed with Rachel some areas of practice that he felt she could develop, such as taking the initiative and planning care for women and to prioritise care appropriately and he has drawn on specific examples from practice to do this. Now, approaching the intermediate review, although James feels that Rachel has improved, he is worried that she might not make sufficient progress to pass at the end of the placement in a few weeks. He thinks to himself 'I will make a call to the link lecturer to discuss my concerns'.

Introduction

It is recognised that mentors have a fundamental role in supporting students in the practice setting (NMC 2008). Pre-registration midwifery education programmes are currently required to have at least 50% of the curriculum time in clinical practice, where students will also be assessed and graded on their skills and competence (NMC 2009). This places a large responsibility on midwifery mentors who support students to develop their clinical skills and ultimately determine whether or not they have met the NMC (2009) standards. Therefore it is vital that the education provider (an Approved Education Institution, usually a university) works closely with placement providers to ensure high quality support for both students and mentors (Collington *et al.* 2012). This is normally achieved through the link lecturer role, which the NMC (2008, 2009) see as key to supporting student learning in practice.

The role of the link lecturer

As midwifery education is often located in institutions some distance from their placement providers, it is important that there are strong links and sound channels of communication to ensure quality of placement experience and support for mentors and students (NMC 2011). The role of the link lecturer has been identified as vital to developing and maintaining these relationships and to provide support to practice providers and mentors (Collington *et al.* 2012). The link lecturer can help to ensure quality of student experience by working closely with mentors and students to: identify learning opportunities, write a learning contract, encourage action planning, support weaker students and encourage clarity regarding the assessment/grading process. Sustained commitment is required from mentors to both facilitate student learning in the practice setting and to design individual clinical programmes for student midwives (Spouse 2003). Research was undertaken on the impact of midwifery link lecturers in preparing student midwives to become competent for practice through the MINT project (Fraser *et al.* 2013, Nursing and Midwifery Council 2011). This project identified the importance of midwifery link lecturers being 'visible' in practice in order for '...mentors to assist students to put their learning into practice and monitor learning and assessment decisions' (Fraser *et al.* 2013: 86). It also reiterated the importance of the link lecturer's role in ensuring quality of mentorship and involvement in the process of assessing the student's practice (NMC 2011). Comprehensive support for mentors from both trusts and universities ultimately has potential to enhance quality of maternity care (Finnerty *et al.* 2006).

Supporting mentors and students

The responsibilities of sign-off mentors are identified by the NMC (2008) who note that all mentors must be able to assess competence in practice and confirm that students are capable of safe and effective practice, and to do this they should have access to appropriate support (Table 1). Midwife mentors are effectively safeguarding the public by ensuring student midwives (and subsequently registered midwives) achieve a required standard of competence in order to enter registered practice (NMC 2009). A key finding from the MINT Project (NMC 2011, Fraser *et al.* 2013) identified that support by link lecturers for decisions made by mentors about student competence, was essential to ensure that only those fit for practice were successful. A further benefit of developing supportive relationships between link lecturers and sign-off mentors is the ability to reduce the barriers between university and practice (and a potentially 'them' and 'us' culture) to improve

communication (McSharry & McGloin 2010), and ultimately achieve a collaborative approach to midwifery education (Passmore & Chenery-Morris 2014).

<p>NMC Requirement The mentor should have access to a network of support and supervision to enable them to fulfil their mentoring responsibilities, assist them in making complex judgements regarding competence such as failing a student and to support their professional development.</p>	<p>Guidance Support and supervision may be provided by, for example, other mentors, practice facilitators, practice teachers or link tutors, with due regard to the part of the register and field of practice. Where necessary, inexperienced mentors should seek support from a sign-off mentor who has met the NMC additional criteria for assessing proficiency.</p>
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Table 1: Supporting learning in practice (NMC 2008 p.32)

One way of providing support for sign-off mentors and students is the use of tripartite meetings between the sign-off mentor, student and link lecturer. These have been adopted by many universities in order to foster a partnership approach to developing student learning in practice (Passmore & Chenery-Morris 2014). Collington et al (2012) support the use of tripartite meetings and note that they are an important way of supporting mentors and students during the assessment and grading of clinical practice process. Furthermore, tripartite meetings can be used in a number of ways to provide support and links with university lecturers, and can be initiated by the sign-off mentor, student or link lecturer, depending on the situation.

Activity 1

As a mentor consider your responsibility to support students to learn and to assess their progress throughout and at the end of their clinical placement. List all the types of challenges you can think of that may occur during this process. Then think about what you would do to resolve each of these. Who would you contact? What kind of support would you need?

If you are student, list any challenges you have encountered during clinical placements. Reflect on these and consider what you might do to improve your learning. What might you read? Can you use opportunities such as reflective learning sessions to help? If you cannot resolve the issues who might help you? How might you use the intermediate interview in practice or other tripartite meetings to help with this?

Link lecturers have a key role to play in preparing and supporting midwives to undertake their mentoring role effectively (Collington et al 2012) and attendance at an annual update is a requirement for all mentors (NMC 2008). These updates contain information about curriculum

changes, the role and responsibilities of sign-off mentors, as well as providing them with the opportunity to discuss concerns and the challenges of being a sign-off mentor (the importance and content of mentor updates will be discussed in detail later in this series).

Whilst support for mentors and mentor preparation are key to the role of the link lecturer, the importance of them having an insight into the realities of practice for students and mentors was identified by the MINT project (Collington *et al.* 2012, Nursing and Midwifery Council 2011). This is further reinforced by the NMC (2009: 15) who expect link lecturers to have 'contemporary experience' in order to support learning and assessment in practice.

Supporting assessment of practice

Assessment of student competence in practice is a significant part of the role of the midwifery sign-off mentor, and as such requires them to be prepared to undertake this role with confidence. Universities and placement providers must ensure that mentors have received preparation for this role, which will normally be through a formal programme of study approved by the NMC (2008), annual mentor updates and the use of tripartite meetings.

The benefits of tripartite meetings in supporting mentors and students have already been identified, but they are also important in the assessment and grading of practice (Collington *et al.* 2012, Passmore & Chenery-Morris 2014). However, the arrangements for these may vary between universities and may be conducted in person, online or by phone – but ultimately they will enable the link lecturer to monitor and moderate the grading of clinical practice, to ensure consistency and application of the grading process (Collington *et al.* 2012). The link lecturer will not normally have worked clinically with the student and will not have the evidence of cases and interactions on which to base the grading, but they will be able to monitor the fairness of the sign-off mentor's judgement through their understanding of the assessment criteria and the discussions on the student's performance in practice (NMC 2011).

Activity 2

If you are a mentor consider how you would prepare to assess a student in clinical practice. What information will you need to do this? Where would you get this information?

If you are a student consider the types of evidence you might draw on when preparing for a meeting when you and your mentor will grade your practice. Where might you record this?

Accountability and Quality

Mentors are accountable for confirming that students have met (or not met) the NMC competencies, so that they are capable of safe and effective midwifery practice (NMC, 2008). They are also responsible for providing appropriate learning opportunities to enable student midwives to develop their clinical skills, knowledge and competence in practice. They have a duty to protect women and babies and to safeguard the profession (Passmore & Chenery-Morris 2014), and should ensure that the process of assessment is completed correctly and both the mentor and student are fully aware of the reasons for any decisions made regarding the student's competence in practice. Whilst mentors carry the responsibility of assessing student competence, it is evident that they welcome link lecturer input to share some of this responsibility (Mallik & McGowan 2007). This is reinforced by Collington *et al.* (2012), who acknowledge the responsibilities facing sign-off mentors who are not only assessing student competence, but are grading practice, and as such are contributing to the student's credits for practice and overall academic award. They identify that supporting sign-off mentors with practice assessment is a fundamental role of the link lecturer and using a tripartite approach to the assessment process is seen as valuable.

In addition to the accountability of the mentor in supporting student midwives, the quality of clinical placements must be assured, through audit and monitoring, to provide quality experience for students (NMC 2009). This should include a review of the number of appropriately qualified sign-off mentors for each placement, a profile of the learning opportunities available for students and student feedback on placement experiences. Close working relationships and clear lines of communication between universities and placement providers are therefore vital to ensure prompt notification of issues likely to impact on the quality of student experience in practice, such as insufficient sign-off mentors, lack of continuity of mentorship, changes to service provision, or negotiating a change of mentor. An understanding of the role and responsibilities of the link lecturer by placement providers and sign-off mentors is also important to facilitate this process of communication and collaboration.

Activity 3: List all the activities you think a link lecturer might be involved in. Consider the way that these activities might foster communication and relations between university and practice.

Reflection on the scenario

Support for mentors is vital to assist them to facilitate student learning and to conduct assessment and grading in practice. James intends to access support from the link lecturer at this point half way through the placement to discuss his concerns. He also plans to ask a colleague who is an experienced sign-off mentor to work with Rachel to gain a second opinion. The link lecturer may attend the meeting to support James and Rachel to discuss specific examples from practice and to jointly consider how Rachel may be supported to make the improvement needed to achieve the relevant competencies at the Year 3 level. A specific learning plan will be developed and documented. How do you think this might help Rachel? How might this be conducted in a positive way so that Rachel feels confident and motivated to learn?

Conclusion

Strong relationships and clear lines of communication between universities and placement providers are fundamental to the success of supporting student learning in clinical practice. The challenges facing midwifery sign-off mentors of ensuring quality of student learning experience, as well as assessing and grading student competence mean that support from link lecturers is essential to foster a collaborative approach to midwifery education.

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