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Mentor update and support: what do mentors need from an update?

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 seventh article Mari Phillips and Joyce Marshall consider some of the key issues related to mentor update and support and consider what mentors need from their annual update.

Scenario

Suzanne recently mentored Annabel and during the final discussion realised that there were some changes to the midwifery curriculum. She is not due to mentor another student immediately but she is keen to find out what the changes are and if there will be any impact on the practice placement. She is due to attend a mentor update session next week.

Introduction

The NMC is very clear that all mentors should maintain and develop their knowledge skills and competence related to mentorship through regular updating. This normally takes place annually and ensures that mentors have current knowledge of NMC approved programmes; are able to discuss the implications of changes to NMC requirements, have an opportunity to discuss issues related to mentoring and to review and reflect on the assessment of student competence and fitness for safe and effective practice (NMC 2008a). Mentors may be required to demonstrate to their managers that they have done this as part of their triennial review or appraisal and to NMC quality assurance agents when monitoring visits are undertaken.

Value of annual updating

Pre-registration midwifery students spend 50% of their programme in practice placements and must be supervised by a sign-off mentor for a minimum of 40% of that time so the role and responsibility of the sign-off mentor is a vital part in the education and training of health care professionals (Bray and Nettleton, 2007). Mentors continue to learn and become even more effective mentors through attending update events and participating in discussion with colleagues (Gopee, 2011). The provision of an annual update is an integral part of the support for sign-off mentors and provides an opportunity to reflect on both the successes and challenges of mentorship.

Attendance not only means that the sign-off mentor is compliant with the Standard for Supporting Learning in Practice (NMC, 2008a) but also that they are fulfilling the requirements of The Code (NMC, 2008) which requires nurses and midwives to keep their knowledge and skills up to date throughout their working lives and take part in appropriate learning and practice activities that maintain and develop competence and performance.

The challenge for mentors is to prioritise this activity when they are already feeling pressurised by service demands as well as meeting the needs of their mentees. This is further complicated by the changing patterns of working, such as 12 hour shifts, reconfiguration of services, rotation of midwives and also the increase in part time working which has affected the nature of mentoring. It is

therefore important that mentorship updates take account of the feelings, experiences and pressures on mentors (Jervis & Tilki, 2011).

Types of updates

When time is short practitioners have to ensure that they choose the most appropriate type of learning for their continuous professional development (Steel, 2009), and the provision of on-line updating activities may be extremely useful. However the nature of the Standards (NMC, 2008) means that there has to be some type of face to face activity.

Updating sessions are normally provided by and located within the employing Trust and sessions may vary in duration. They may be offered as part of generic mentor updating to all health care practitioners or more commonly as provided within the schedule of annual mandatory updating sessions provided to midwives as part of CNST requirements. Some Trusts may offer updates that are facilitated by dedicated practice learning staff, but more often they are facilitated by academics (link lecturers) from the local university. Updating mentors is the second commonest activity for midwifery lecturers in practice placements (Collington et al, 2011). This offers further opportunity for partnership working, between the university and the service, in relation to pre-registration education and provides specific time for mentors to engage directly with lecturers.

Activity 1

If you are a mentor consider any issues that arose when you mentored your most recent student. Identify and write down potential questions that you might ask at your next mentor update to help you mentor more effectively.

If you are a student think about your experience on your last placement and list all the skills you think a mentor needs to effectively help students learn.

A typical update session

A typical session will start with a welcome and introductions and provides a good opportunity to meet and network with mentors working in other areas; this simple activity is sometimes difficult to achieve in very busy areas. The session will certainly include an outline and explanation of any changes, actual or planned, to the organisation or content of the curriculum or placements. Any changes to the curriculum will be subject to a university and NMC approval process but it is important to consider how these may impact on the individual placement areas and the nature of experience that student midwives will need to obtain. It is essential that mentors are familiar with the learning opportunities that students may be required to access and any changes to the practice documentation.

Refreshing mentors' knowledge of assessment processes, and the way in which these fit with the university processes, in particular the assurance of inter-marker reliability are common topics. Preparation for grading practice increases inter-rater reliability and reduces grade inflation (Scanlon and Care, 2008) but ongoing training offers the opportunity for further dialogue (Passmore and Chenery-Morris, 2014). It is always valuable to draw on the range of experiences that colleagues

bring to the discussion, and to highlight the importance of the consistent application of the grading criteria.

The challenge for the lecturers' facilitating the session is to offer the opportunity for meaningful discussion, often within a very limited timeframe, and also to avoid repetition of material. They may ask at the beginning of the session if anyone has specific questions or issues that they wish to discuss. One useful format for updating sessions is the use of scenarios. These provide a useful focus for discussion of challenging situations or potential problems; see for example the situations discussed by Kenyon, Hogarth and Marshall (2015). Mentors are usually very clear about what constitutes 'safe' clinical practice but guidance may be required when dealing with students' who may be upset, manipulative or aggressive when being referred or failed in a practice setting (Jervis and Tilki, 2011). Other mentors' views of helpful strategies and possible solutions or experiences of less helpful approaches can provide further insights into the complexities of mentorship and assessment and help develop confidence and competence in mentorship practice. It is important that the anonymity of individual students is maintained and confidentiality of any personal information assured.

Getting the most from a mentor update session

Attendance at a mentor update session can sometimes be viewed as rather a 'chore', especially when there are so many competing demands on time. It may be helpful to think about the session as an opportunity to 'sharpen the saw' (Covey, 1989) and part of the habit of continuous improvement that contributes to an enhanced level of understanding of mentorship and makes a contribution to post-registration ongoing education and practice (PREP) requirements (NMC, 2011).

As with any other continuous professional development activity, preparation is essential to get the most out of an update session. Reflection on recent mentoring experience can generate questions or issues for discussion. It may be helpful to formulate these as personal learning objectives, which should be SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time-bounded) (Table 1). Guidance provided for PREP (NMC, 2011) suggests that a detailed account of each learning activity undertaken is documented, as part of the professional portfolio, together with the outcome, including a record of the effect it has on subsequent work or practice. Each mentor should ensure that their attendance is recorded and the local register updated. This evidence will be helpful for meeting triennial review requirements (Gopee, 2011) and is part of the personal accountability of each healthcare professional to maintain and improve their professional knowledge and competence (NMC, 2008b).

Activity 2

Identify the date for your next update and ensure that you have booked your place. Revisit the questions you identified and try to formulate some SMART objectives for the session. Find some journal articles on mentorship that relate to your objectives and read these before attending the session.

If you are a student consider your next placement and set some SMART objectives to focus your learning.

S	Specific	A specific goal is more likely to be achieved. Try answering the questions: Who? What? Why? Where? When?
M	Measurable	Identify the criteria for the goals you set. How much? How many?
A	Achievable	Ensure it is possible to achieve the goals you set.
R	Realistic	Given the resources – can it be done?
T	Time bounded	Set a time frame to complete your goal.

Table 1: Explanation of SMART objectives

Other sources of support

The annual update is just one aspect of the support for mentors. If a mentor has a particular concern about a student's progress or achievement then contacting the appropriate link lecturer will certainly be the first step. However, it is also useful to discuss mentoring challenges with another experienced mentor, though being very aware that students do not perceive that they are being discussed behind their back – see challenges. The speed of change in healthcare has increased the need for strong partnerships and managers and Supervisors of Midwives may also provide useful points of advice and support (Finnerty et al, 2006) especially in relation to practice issues. Many Trusts employ practice learning facilitators (or equivalent) who are able to provide advice on specific problems and are usually knowledgeable about Trust policies and the interface with the university.

Activity 3

If you are a mentor, following your annual update session make a list of your own continuing professional development (CPD) in the mentor role. Consider how you can keep yourself up to date and what you might include in your professional portfolio. Discuss this with your Supervisor of Midwives.

If you are a student imagine you are mentoring a student who is less experienced than yourself (there are often peer mentoring schemes in place for students), consider how you might prepare for a meeting with that student to offer helpful support.

Reflection on the scenario

Attending the mentor update can assist Suzanne in clarifying the requirements of the midwifery curriculum that the students are studying and help Suzanne to better plan the learning opportunities for her next student.

Conclusion

It is essential that mentors are up to date with current midwifery and mentorship practice and are required to demonstrate how they maintain their professional development as part of their commitment to lifelong learning. Mentor update sessions are one part of the ongoing support for

mentors and provide the opportunity share the success and challenges of preparing the next generation of midwives.

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