



Original Research – Quantitative

Evaluating a standardised clinical assessment tool for pre-registration midwifery students: A cross-sectional survey of midwifery students and midwives in Australia



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ABSTRACT

Background: Assessment of clinical competence is a core component of midwifery education. Clinical assessment tools have been developed to help increase consistency and overcome subjectivity of assessment.

Aim: The study had two main aims. The first was to explore midwifery students and educators/clinical midwives' views and experiences of a common clinical assessment tool used for all preregistration midwifery programmes in Victoria and the University of South Australia. The second was to assess the need for changes to the tool to align with developments in clinical practice and evidence-based care.

Methods: A cross-sectional, web-based survey including Likert-type scales and open-ended questions was utilised.

Setting: Students enrolled in all four entry pathways to midwifery at seven Victorian and one South Australian university and educators/clinical midwives across both states.

Findings: One hundred and ninety-one midwifery students' and 86 educators/clinical midwives responded.

Overall, students and educators/clinical midwives were positive about the Clinical Assessment Tool with over 90% reporting that it covered the necessary midwifery skills. Students and educators/clinical midwives reported high levels of satisfaction with the content of the learning tools. Only 4% of educators/clinical midwives and 6% of students rated the Clinical Assessment Tool as poor overall. Changes to some learning tools were necessary in order to reflect recent practice and evidence.

Key conclusions and implications for practice: A common clinical assessment tool for evaluating midwifery students' clinical practice may facilitate the provision of consistent, reliable and objective assessment of student skills and competency.

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Summary of relevance

Problem

There are challenges with assessment of midwifery students' competence, including the use of existing clinical assessment tools.

What is already known

Debate continues regarding the definition and assessment of clinical competence in midwifery education. Clinical assessment

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tools are used in an attempt to overcome potential subjectivity and bias and to promote fairness in the assessment of clinical performance.

What this paper adds

The evaluation of the standardised Clinical Assessment Tool indicates that the tool is well accepted by midwives and students and may facilitate the provision of consistent, reliable and objective assessment of student skills and competency.

Background

In Australia and internationally, accredited midwifery education programmes incorporate both clinical practice and theory elements.¹ Assessment of the clinical competence of midwifery and nursing students has been debated with no consensus reached on the definition of competence or how best to assess it.^{2–4} Competence has been referred to as “a generic quality referring to a person’s overall capacity”, while “competency refers to specific capabilities such as leadership, which are made up of knowledge, attitudes and skills”.⁵ The International Confederation of Midwives describes competence as “the knowledge, skills and behaviours required of the midwife for safe practice in any setting”.⁶

A 2002 systematic review of clinical competence assessment in nursing education identified that issues of reliability and validity of the competency measures used have not been addressed, and there remains confusion about the concept and definition of clinical competence.³ Traditionally, clinical assessment has relied on observation of student performance by another individual, such as a preceptor, a process which can be subjective and influenced by observer bias.^{7,8} The development of clinical assessment tools has been in part to help overcome this potential subjectivity and ensure students are assessed fairly.⁷ It has been suggested that for key stakeholders (students, clinical assessors and lecturers) to have confidence in the methods used to assess students’ clinical competence they need to be fair, comparable and standardised.⁴ Consequently, there has been a renewed focus on clinical assessment particularly in the nursing discipline with the development of the pre-registration nursing competencies assessment tool (NCAT) for use across Australian universities⁹ and the Australian Nursing Standards Assessment Tool (ANSAT).¹⁰ However, there has been limited focus on developing a national clinical assessment tool for midwifery students.

Challenges in the administration of clinical competency assessment tools across nursing and midwifery have been reported by students and educators.^{7,8,11,12} These included clinical staff being unsure of how clinical assessment tools worked and how they were to be completed.^{7,8} There has also been a lack of consistency between different assessors and clinical competence assessment tools have at times been viewed as “... a tedious formality rather than an integral part of students’ supervision and education” (p. 523).⁷ Other concerns have included the time consuming nature of assessments, that clinical care is sometimes seen as the priority,¹² and that finding available assessors can be difficult.^{8,12} A recent study conducted in Victoria, found that students expressed concern that they were unable to focus on other aspects of midwifery care as they were instead focusing on ‘chasing the numbers’ required to meet minimum practice requirements (p. 664).¹¹ Students and midwives highlighted concerns regarding the reliability of the competency assessments, with preceptors and clinical teachers describing the tools (those in use prior to the introduction of the CAT) as time ‘consuming, repetitive, confusing and unachievable’ (p. 664)¹¹ with students

citing fragmented preceptorship as obstructive in the assessment of their competence.

The Common Assessment Tool (CAT)

In 2009 a Common Assessment Tool (CAT) was developed for clinical assessment of students enrolled in all pre-registration midwifery courses in Victoria. The tool was developed following discussions between Midwifery Academics of Victoria (MIDAC) and rural and metropolitan maternity unit managers. The results of a survey of midwives’ and students’ views on clinical assessment was used by MIDAC to develop this CAT.¹³ At the time of the discussions (January, 2009) health services were experiencing a substantial shortage of qualified midwives.¹³ There was significant interest in midwifery courses but universities could only offer a limited number of places due to a lack of clinical placements. There was a need to find a way to increase student numbers to address the workplace deficits. The development of the CAT, a standardised assessment tool, was aimed at reducing the time and effort it took midwives to assess individual student’s clinical performance.¹³ The reduced workload associated with individual student assessment in the clinical area would allow health services to provide a greater number of clinical placements.

Midwives and students were surveyed prior to development of the CAT to explore their views about clinical assessment. Their views were sought regarding whether clinical assessment should be an evaluation of competency or skills-based or a combination of the two. Responses indicated a preference for a combined approach, therefore the CAT included two components; 24 learning tools specific to midwifery practice skills such as abdominal examination ([Supplementary 1](#)), and a separate competency-based assessment based on the National Competency Standards for the Midwife, Nursing and Midwifery Board of Australia (NMBA).¹⁴ Together with a clinical assessor, student competency is assessed using a modified Bondy scale ([Supplementary 2](#)). Students must obtain an ‘independent’ or ‘proficient’ grade, or an ‘assisted’ grade if in the early stages of their midwifery programme. These assessments are applied for the student level, as distinct from the level that would be expected of a registered midwife. To be considered competent, all 24 tools must be completed over the duration of the students’ course. Each skill assessment includes components of relevant NMBA competencies. Competency assessments are undertaken during the course of study, the timing and frequency of which varies by university.

This study aimed to evaluate the CAT from the perspective of midwifery students (hereafter referred to as students) and educators/clinical midwives (hereafter referred to as midwives) responsible for assessing midwifery students, and to assess the need for any changes to align with developments in clinical practice and evidence-based care.

Methods

This study used a cross-sectional survey design. Two online surveys built in Qualtrics^{®17} using Likert-type scales and open-ended questions were utilised; one for students who had used the CAT, this included all students, excluding those in first year who would have had limited time on clinical placement, and the second for midwives who had used it to undertake students’ clinical assessments.

Context of the current study

In the state of Victoria, seven universities have accredited midwifery education programmes.¹⁵ Four pathways are available; these include a Bachelor of Midwifery (BM); Bachelor of Nursing/ Bachelor of Midwifery double degree (BNBM); a Graduate Diploma

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