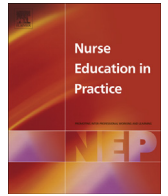




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Continuing midwifery education beyond graduation: Student midwives' awareness of continuous professional development

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ABSTRACT

Midwifery education plays an important role in educating graduates about engaging in continuous professional development (CPD) but there is a lack of empirical research analysing student midwives' awareness of CPD beyond graduation. We aimed to explore student midwives' awareness of the need to become lifelong learners and to map their knowledge of CPD activities available after graduation. Therefore, forty-seven reflective documents, written in the last week of student midwives' training programme, were analysed in a thematic way. Content analysis confirmed student midwives' awareness of the importance of CPD before graduation. They mentioned different reasons for future involvement in CPD and described both, formal and informal CPD-activities. Respondents were especially aware of the importance of knowledge, to a lesser degree of skills-training and still less of the potential value of the Internet for individual and collective learning. Respondents perceived a need for a mandatory preceptorship. Supporting learning guides were highly valued and the importance of reflection on CPD was well-established. This could have resulted from an integrated reflective learning strategy during education.

Conclusion: Undergraduate midwives are aware of the importance of CPD and the interplay of formal and informal learning activities. Virtual learning requires special attention to overcome CPD challenges.

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Introduction

Continuing education and continuous professional development are formal requirements to maintain registration to practice. Continuing education (CE) can be defined as a structured educational process supporting continuous professional development (CPD) (Graham et al., 2006). CPD keeps midwives up-to-date to meet the needs of patients (women and babies), and the health service in general. It incorporates the continued acquisition of new knowledge, skills, and attitudes to maintain and enhance professional competent practice (Peck et al., 2000). Continuing education and continuous professional development belong to the EU-Framework of Lifelong Learning. Lifelong learning refers to all learning activities undertaken throughout life (European Commission, 2000). The present study explores student

midwives' awareness of the need to become lifelong learners and to map their knowledge of CPD-activities available after graduation.

The need to become lifelong learners can be linked to current economic and social changes and the rapid transition to a knowledge-based society. This reality calls for new educational approaches in terms of education and training (European Commission, 2000). The International Confederation of Midwives (ICM) described a lifelong learning approach in their Position Statement: Basic and Ongoing Education for Midwives (2014). ICM states that midwifery competence can be achieved through multiple formal educational pathways based on the ICM Global Standards for Midwifery Education (ICM, 2011), that all midwifery educators should be competent in theory and practice and that learning is an ongoing process to ensure continuous professional development (CPD). ICM further stresses that it is the ethical duty of each midwife to remain safe and current in practice at all times. Therefore, continuing education should be compulsory for all practicing midwives (ICM, 2014). As stated before, CPD is the embodiment of both professional learning and personal growth (Davis et al., 2003). It incorporates educational methods beyond the didactic, embodies concepts of self-directed learning and personal

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development and considers organizational and system factors (Barnes et al., 2003).

CPD is complex and builds on different theories of learning, comprising adult learning, constructivist learning, and both situated and social learning theories (Johnson and Davies, 2009; Carter and Jackson, 2009). These learning theories underpin the adoption of varying didactic strategies (e.g., case studies, peer evaluation, portfolio development) in both formal and informal settings. The latter integration of formal and informal learning appears to be essential to develop new competencies, both from an individual and organizational perspective (Ellström, 2013 p106).

- (1) In the past, CPD emphasised technical upgrading, following conventional didactical routines (defined as a lecture-based, teacher driven approach). CPD-activities mainly built on thematic content-focused courses, conferences by experts, hands-on workshops, and the like (Bolderston, 2007). More recently, the Internet facilitates participation in online CPD-activities; e.g., with e-learning packages (Bolderston, 2007). These formal learning activities can also lead to academic or professional awards (Johnson, 2012).
- (2) A contemporary view on CPD adopts adult education approaches and emphasizes starting from learner-defined goals as well as 'small-group, learner-centered, experiential, reflective, deep and self-directed learning' (Stevenson et al., 2001; Ellström, 2013 p 105; Evans et al., 2013 p356, p362). Taylor and Evans show that self-directed learning has become a fundamental component of informal learning: 'searching independently for information' and 'practicing without supervision'. Yet, informal learning is not limited to independent mastery of work procedures but also encompasses the relationship between learners, context and opportunities. For example, the authors found that informal learning also results from 'mentoring or coaching' as well as participating in 'focused discussions' or committees (Evans et al., 2013 p 363). In this context we mix adult, constructivist and social learning theories, resulting in what is labelled as 'communities of practice' (CoP). Communities of practice are 'informal networks' among members of a particular specialty or work group who have developed a common sense of purpose and a desire to share work-related knowledge and experience (Lave and Wenger, 1990; Mann, 2011). In this way CoPs offer a relevant platform for CPD. In addition, we build on the potential of the Internet to support informal CPD-activities; e.g., through e-learning portfolios, exchange and discussion of cases, interactive Internet discussion groups, ... (Johnson and Davies, 2009; Stewart et al., 2012; Brookshire et al., 2013 p 331). Available evidence shows that informal learning, strongly emphasizing participant involvement can change professional practice and, in some situations, health outcomes (Bolderston, 2007).

The former implies undergraduate health care programmes should support students to become independent and lifelong learners. Initial training should already push a learner focus on formal and informal CPD-activities, in order to increase their motivation for further learning (Evans et al., 2013 p 362). This presents the context and the aim of the present qualitative study; to explore student midwives' awareness of the need to become lifelong learners and to map their knowledge of CPD-activities available after graduation. So far, no research has been published building on the point of view of student midwives at the end of their midwifery training. The following research questions guided our research: 1) What are student' midwives perceptions about professional development at the end of their midwifery training

programme?; 2) How will undergraduates keep themselves updated once they graduated?

Method

Context

The Midwifery department of the University College Arteveldehogeschool, Ghent (Belgium) offers a three-year undergraduate programme with a competency-based curriculum, resulting in a midwifery certification that gives access to the independent midwifery profession. The transition from novice to expert is not – unlike in the UK – legally organized with a mandatory preceptorship. Nevertheless, CPD is legally regulated since 2010 (Ministerial Circular, 2010). To develop lifelong learning competencies, an integrated learning, assessment and supervision workplace learning model was implemented in the workplace learning programme (Embo et al., 2014). An important feature of the latter curriculum is a reflective learning and assessment strategy with a written reflection on CPD at the end of the last midwifery placement, shortly before graduation. Students are not enrolled in a special CPD-course but – as an integrated part of their final placement – they are instructed to reflect on midwifery competencies, their current professional development and education needs and the importance of CPD for future learning. This reflection task is invoked by the following questions: Do you feel 'fit for practice'? What competencies need further improvement? What do you think about your future learning as a midwife? The students' answers to these reflection questions were analysed to look for an answer for the research questions in this paper.

Research design

This qualitative study builds on the analysis of structured written reflections on CPD, gathered at the end of the final midwifery placement. Forty-seven written reflection assignments from third year midwifery students, who graduated between June and September 2013 were used in this study. The population consisted of 51 students, reflections from four students were not included because their materials were accidentally not archived. All written reflections considered for analysis were collected between April and September 2013. The reflection texts were anonymized before analysis by the principal investigator (ME) who was not involved in supervision nor in the assessment of students' reflections. The study was conducted in full accordance with the 1975 Declaration of Helsinki, its revised version of 1983 and in full accordance with national ethical guidelines.

Data analysis

Following the guidelines of Miles and Huberman (1994 p58), we created a provisional 'start list' of codes prior to the analysis activity. This start list included all CPD-activities and CPD-goals as found in the literature review described in the introduction. The list was applied to a first set of field notes ($n = 5$), and then examined closely for fit and power. The list of codes was discussed between the researchers. The description of indicators for some codes was revised, but in general the conceptual orientation served the analysis purpose sufficiently. The ATLAS.ti software (version 6.1.6) was used to manage and store data. Content analysis was performed by the first author, next to a research assistant who – independently – also coded all documents. Both researchers compared their findings and discussed differences until consensus was attained.

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