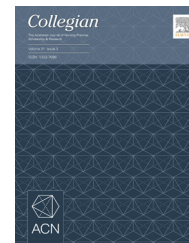




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An overview of the ways nurses understand and utilise the existing Australian Competency Standards for Registered Nurses

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Summary The aim of this paper is to highlight the ways nurses understand and utilise the Australian National Competency Standards for Registered Nurses, which have been used for over two decades to determine both beginning level and ongoing competence to practise. This paper reports on a two-phase exploratory mixed methods study that examined what mechanisms influenced nurses' interpretation and application of these Standards in the context of assessment from a critical realist perspective.

The rationale for this paper is to highlight the importance of an urgent critical review of the Standards to determine; their relevance as an assessment framework capable of assessing both quantitative and qualitative nursing practices and the ambiguities in contemporary nursing practice and raise whether competency standards continue to be appropriate for the nursing profession.

The paper concludes by recommending that: (1) an urgent review of the Standards be undertaken, (2) the need for critical debate and research to identify the modes of teaching and learning activities that promote competence in terms of knowledge, understanding and skills that are consistently understood and applied by nurses, (3) given the lack of existing evidence regarding how nurses use the Standards and make decisions regarding another nurses or their

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own competence further research is recommended that focuses on the mechanisms that impact on assessment, and (4) effective mechanisms be established for gaining feedback from nurses regarding the assessment framework adopted.

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1. Introduction

The understanding and utilisation of the Australian National Competency Standards for Registered Nurses (soon to be the Registered Nurse Standards for Practice) is an important topic for the profession. For over two decades in Australia, competence and its assessment have been a fundamental premise underpinning the nursing profession. The Nursing and Midwifery Board of Australia (NMBA) has approved the existing *ANMC National Competency Standards for the Registered Nurse* (2006) (the Standards). These Standards are legislated under the *Health Practitioner Regulation National Law Act (2009)* whose object is to establish a national registration and accreditation scheme for the regulation of health practitioners. The competency standards were designed to assure the profession, employers and the public of the competence of registered nurses to provide high quality nursing care through safe and effective work practices (Battersby, 1994; Pearson et al., 2002). The Standards are embraced by the profession as the quantifiable measure of the standard of nursing care expected of all nurses (ANMC, 2006). Hence, the Standards are viewed as both a benchmark and a framework used to promote consistency in the assessment of an individual's performance in practice.

The paper highlights the findings of a research project that explored the ways nurses understand and utilise the Australian National Competency Standards for Registered Nurse Standards. Since the completion of this research the NMBA has funded a project to develop *Registered nurse standards for practice* alongside an examination of the existing Standards. The review commenced in April 2014 and is due to be completed by the end of 2015. The findings from this research provide valuable insights into the challenges with the current Standards and are useful for the current review and development of the new standards for practice.

2. Background

Over the last three decades research into the concept of competence (Bradshaw, 1997, 1998; Brooks, 2009) has highlighted debate about the interplay between competency standards and clinical practice (Chiarella et al., 2008; McCoy et al., 2013; Sutton & Arbon, 1994; Walker, 1995) and the problems of assessing competence or developing indicators of competence (Cheek et al., 1995; Grealish, 2009; Garside & Nhemachena, 2013). Added to this, educators and employers of health care professionals often have differing views of what competency entails. Their difference in views can be attributed to the ambiguity associated with the term 'competence' and subsequently the competency standards themselves (Scott Tilley, 2008; Whittaker et al., 2000). Further, confusion has emanated from how the term competence/competency is used in the professional regulation

arena as opposed to how it is used in the vocational education sector (Delamare Le Deist & Winterton, 2005; Wagenaar, 2014). In the vocational education sector, competence is based around competency based training whereby a student of nursing is required to successfully complete all units of competence to be eligible to gain the qualification. The units of competence include a variety of assessments the students must pass, which are greater than the performance of tasks. That is, whilst students must be assessed in specific tasks to gain the qualification, competence is far broader than the acquisition of skills. In the nursing degree program on the other hand, competence is defined by the competency standards which in broad terms describe the expected levels of knowledge, attitudes, skills and behaviours and form part of the prerequisites required for eligibility for registration. This has led to confusion regarding 'competence' and 'assessment of competence'. Consequently competency has been described as a 'fuzzy concept' (Klink & van der Boon, 2002: 6) with the lack of clarity in the operationalisation of competence continuing to impact on competency assessment, particularly in the development of valid and reliable assessment tools (Grealish, 2009). As a result, as the competency movement has progressed, an array of terminology and jargon emerged, which has led to confusion between educationalists, regulators and nurses in practice.

Since their release in the early 1990s, issues have been raised about the way in which the Standards are understood and applied in the assessment of nurses' competence for practice. The Standards, which define the requirements that applicants, registrants or students need to meet to be registered, are adopted by the Nursing and Midwifery Board of Australia Authority (NMBA). The Standards are positioned as the 'gate' to gain entry to practise and the assessors as 'gate keepers' of professional practice who ensure the Standards are met prior to registration (initial and ongoing). The validity and reliability of assessments is dependent on the capability of the assessor and the assessment instrument used (Butler et al., 2011; Levett-Jones et al., 2006). Summative judgements are delegated to clinical nurses without a process of assessment moderation, which places considerable trust in the competency of the assessor (Brackenreg, 2004; Carney & Bistline, 2008).

There are a variety of competency assessment instruments used in nursing practice with continued debate surrounding their appropriateness and quality (Crookes & Brown, 2010; Franklin & Melville, 2015; Norman et al., 2002). Understanding is needed regarding how the Standards are operationalised and used in assessing student performance (Edwards & Chapman, 2001). A number of recent national projects have examined the effects of an individual's competence that use the Standards (Crookes & Brown, 2010). In 2013 this resulted in the NMBA

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