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Original Research – Quantitative

Validation of the Australian Midwifery Standards Assessment Tool (AMSAT): A tool to assess midwifery competence

Linda Sweet^{a,*}, Maryam Bazargan^a, Lois McKellar^b, Joanne Gray^c, Amanda Henderson^{d,e}

^a College of Nursing and Health Science, Flinders University, Australia

^b School of Nursing and Midwifery, University of South Australia, Australia

^c Centre for Midwifery, Child and Family Health, Faculty of Health, University of Technology Sydney, Australia

^d School of Nursing and Midwifery, Griffith University, Australia

^e Princess Alexandra Hospital, Brisbane, Australia

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ABSTRACT

Background: There is no current validated clinical assessment tool to measure the attainment of midwifery student competence in the midwifery practice setting. The lack of a valid assessment tool has led to a proliferation of tools and inconsistency in assessment of, and feedback on student learning.

Objective: This research aimed to develop and validate a tool to assess competence of midwifery students in practice-based settings.

Design: A mixed-methods approach was used and the study implemented in two phases. Phase one involved the development of the AMSAT tool with qualitative feedback from midwifery academics, midwife assessors of students, and midwifery students. In phase two the newly developed AMSAT tool was piloted across a range of midwifery practice settings and ANOVA was used to compare scores across year levels, with feedback being obtained from assessors.

Findings: Analysis of 150 AMSAT forms indicate the AMSAT as: reliable (Cronbach alpha greater than 0.9); valid—data extraction loaded predominantly onto one factor; and sensitivity scores indicating level of proficiency increased across the three years. Feedback evaluation forms (n = 83) suggest acceptance of this tool for the purpose of both assessing and providing feedback on midwifery student's practice performance and competence.

Conclusion: The AMSAT is a valid, reliable and acceptable midwifery assessment tool enables consistent assessment of midwifery student competence. This assists benchmarking across midwifery education programs.

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Statement of significance

Problem or issue

Practice-based learning is a critical component for the development of professional competence in midwifery, however in Australia, no nationally validated tool to assess competence was available.

What is already known

Valid and reliable assessment of practice-based learning is essential in professional entry programs including midwifery.

What this paper adds

AMSAT is a valid and acceptable tool to assess midwifery students' ability to meet the Australian competency standards for the midwife.

1. Introduction

Practice-based based learning is a critical component of professional preparation in midwifery, as with other health

* Corresponding author at: College of Nursing and Health Science, Flinders University, P.O. Box 2100, Adelaide 5001, Australia.

E-mail address: linda.sweet@flinders.edu.au (L. Sweet).

professions. Indeed, in Australia it is mandated that 50% of the educational preparation for midwifery occur in practice-based settings.¹ Assessment of professional competence during practice experience placements is imperative to ensure the achievement of competence standards upon graduation.² Student's ability to competently perform in practice-based settings needs to be determined through a performance-based evaluation. Assessments of midwifery students practice should therefore be carried out in the context of real clinical practice.¹ The accompanying assessment process needs to be valid, reliable, transparent, have educational effect, be acceptable and feasible, and where appropriate, provide effective feedback for learning.³ Ideally, assessment of midwifery student competence is based on the observation of routine authentic encounters which are rated by assessors using reliable and valid tools.^{4–7}

In Australia, midwifery is guided by the Nursing and Midwifery Board of Australia's (NMBA) National Competency Standards for the Midwife.⁸ The NMBA defines competence as 'the combination of skills, knowledge, attitudes, values and abilities that underpin effective and/or superior performance in professional/occupational area'.⁸ Midwifery students are required to meet the NMBA midwifery competency standards upon graduation. Whilst midwifery education programs in Australia are required to assess competence against the NMBA standards, there is no nationally standardised assessment tool for this process. There has been some attempt across the country to use a standardised assessment tool in some states,⁹ but in general, midwifery education providers across the country each have their own clinical assessment tools to evaluate students' clinical performance resulting in a proliferation of tools and inconsistency in assessment methods.^{3,10}

The importance of valid and reliable instruments to assess standards of performance is well recognised.^{3,11–13} In Australia, the national midwifery education standards require the use of assessment processes that are valid and reliable.¹ Valid and reliable tools are important so that the profession has confidence in the ability of health professionals to perform their practice.^{11,12,14–16} A nationally standardised tool would promote improved compliance with assessors in practice-based settings only needing to know and use one tool for all students, and enable comparison of student outcomes and benchmarking across courses and programs.¹⁵ If interpretations from practice-based assessments are to be valid then the instrument needs to be both psychometrically sound and educationally informative.^{12,15,17,18}

This paper describes the development and testing of an assessment instrument, the Australian Midwifery Standards Assessment Tool (AMSAT) based on the National Competency Standards for the Midwife in Australia.⁸ The systematic process outlined in this paper demonstrates the capacity of the tool to meet the criteria for good assessment.³

2. Background

A review of the English language literature failed to identify any psychometrically validated assessment tools specific for assessing midwifery competence. Norman et al.¹⁹ demonstrated that the midwifery assessment tools used in Scotland lacked psychometric validity. There was one clinical assessment tool (CAT), which is a collection of 24 individual skills,^{9,20} that had been evaluated at the reaction level,²¹ but there was no evidence of validation of its psychometric properties. Similarly there was a midwifery mini-CEX tool²² which also lacked psychometric assessment. Furthermore, one psychometrically validated assessment tool was located (CACTiM),²³ but the intent of this tool was for preceptors to assess critical thinking in midwifery students and not competence. It is clear therefore, that there is an absence of competence assessment tools that have been successfully rigorously tested, and that the

tools that currently exist do not easily demonstrate attainment of the requisite competency standards.

Beyond the midwifery profession, development of national instruments to evaluate student competency performance in practice-based experiences has been achieved in Speech Pathology,²⁴ Physiotherapy,²⁵ Occupational Therapy,²⁶ and Nursing.¹² These tools determine whether students have met the professional standards through examination of authentic practice-based performance using quality validated assessment tools. Given the absence of a midwifery specific competence assessment tool, it became clear that a nationally relevant standardised tool was required.

McAlister et al.¹³ identified four major conceptual issues that should be considered when designing assessments of professional competence; these being measurement processes, quality measurement, assessment and learning, and assessment content. Measurement process relies on quality professional judgement, using clearly defined standards and based on sufficient quantity and quality of observational evidence.¹³ Quality measurement requires statistical validation of the assessment tool.¹³ Assessment and learning highlight the need for authentic and relevant assessment that capture the development of competence over time, and provides for lifelong learning through formative, and not just summative processes.¹³ Assessment content requires a tool that integrates generic and occupational specific competencies that are assessed in practice-based placements.¹³ All of these concepts were considered in the development of AMSAT.

It is well known that the rater is a primary source of measurement error in performance assessment.¹³ One approach to overcome this is the use of clearly articulated behavioural cues. Behavioural cues are useful because they describe discrete routine behaviours pertinent to care delivery and professional performance.²⁷ Several practice-based assessment tools used in nursing and allied health professional groups in Australia are accompanied by behavioural cues (e.g. APP,²⁵ COMPASS,²⁴ ANSAT¹²). Behavioural cues are self-explanatory statements that, through everyday language, clearly describe acts and practices that indicate domains of professional standards. Behavioural cues provide clarity and transparency for the assessor who needs to determine a student's level of attainment, and for students who should be encouraged to self-assess and who need to make sense of the feedback. The development of behavioural cues was viewed as an important component for AMSAT development.

Franklin and Melville¹¹ argue that within the nursing profession, there has been an over reliance on assessments that focus on a single 'snapshot-in-time', ones that focus on psychomotor skills (task performance), a 'one-size fits all' approach, and an over use of tick-box style assessments, all of which may fail to assess the practitioners 'real-life' competence to perform in the complex clinical environment. They posit the need for a shift to a more holistic approach, centred in the real-life practice environments, where assessments are undertaken by trained assessors, over a continuum of time, using a validated assessment tool, that enables identification over a range of performance levels such as Benner's²⁸ developmental scale of novice to expert, and incorporates feedback and reflection.¹¹ Whilst these arguments are structured in the context of nursing education, the issues and concerns are consistent with midwifery education and the development of AMSAT.

Prescott-Clements et al.¹⁷ have shown the value of longitudinal evaluation of performance, with multiple assessments undertaken to determine competence. Their tool¹⁷ used generic global domains akin to the medical mini-CEX,²⁹ an approach which has previously been trialed in midwifery,²² however mini-CEX are global in nature and not directly aligned with occupation specific performance standards. A combination of occupational

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