

# “Failing to Fail”

Mentors’ perspectives on failing post-  
registration nurses

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“Most assessment of competence should be undertaken through direct observation of practice.”

NMC 2006

# Gate-keepers to the profession

“Assessment of students by qualified nurses is considered to be a key component of professional self-regulation.”

Ashbridge, 2003

# Mentor study

3 Adult Units:

- General ICU
- Neurological ICU
- Cardiothoracic ICU



St George's Hospital  
London

# Research Methodology

## Qualitative research

- Questionnaire
- Follow up interviews (volunteered)

# Headline Results

- No. of competency assessments:   
Failed 3/108 (2.8%)  
“Referred”, “Retake” or “Borderline Pass”  
9/108 (8.3%)

## Free text summary

- The majority of respondents were uncomfortable with failing colleagues

# Failing a competency assessment

- Rare occurrence
- Perception of an expectation of passing
- Pressure from colleagues to ‘pass’ someone
- Pressure from Faculty (‘paperwork!’)
- Consequences for the student

“Failing a student is therefore seen as an ‘act of courage’ by a mentor, one that is not taken lightly, and is only in situations where the student’s performance is seen to be distinctly faulty.”

Scholes & Albarran

# Themes

- Expectation of passing
- Mentorship role
- Competency of mentor
- Work relationships

# Expectation of passing

- Pressure to put people on courses regardless of their suitability
- Expectation by everyone that nobody fails courses
- Perverse disincentives to failing candidates

# KSF & the Mentorship Role

- Mentorship is now a pre-requisite for many Band 6 posts
- Access to mentorship courses is problematic
- Mentorship courses are aimed at the mentorship of pre-registration nurses
- Inadequate training on struggling students / failing students

“I don’t believe that every nurse is capable of being a teacher or an assessor. I don’t believe it should be expected of every nurse.... And it plainly doesn’t work.”

Interviewee B

# Mentorship competency

- Assumption of competency: “You’ve done the course”
- Lack of assessment of mentors
- No audit = no quality assurance

“I think we should be honest about the problems that mentors have. The system assumes that all mentors are competent (at mentorship) honest and rigorous.”

Interviewee D

# Knowledge vs. Seniority

## Perceptions

- Seniority = Confidence to fail
- Up-to-date knowledge
- Course familiarity

# Mentor vs. Assessor

“I felt awkward failing someone that I had been responsible for teaching. I felt like I was the one who had failed.”



# Work relationships

- Assessing colleagues: or assessing friends?
- Face-to-face aspect of assessment
- Loss of trust and/or confidence
- “Awkward atmosphere”
- Dependant on workplace culture

“Assessment of colleagues is tricky because you can be influenced by behaviours generally observed.”

*Questionnaire Respondant N5*

“Having to then work along side the person can be difficult. They may not turn to you for help when they require it with their patient. They may be embarrassed and feel they can’t ask as it would be held against them.”

Questionnaire Respondant G4

# The problems

- Nurses don't like failing each other
- Dual role of mentoring & assessing
- Quality of assessment
- The aftermath of failing someone

RESULT:

We are failing each other - by NOT failing each other

# The way forward?



- Separation of mentor & assessor role
- Mentor training & assessment
- Mentor support
- Quality assurance

Gateway to the profession

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