

Clinical Competence Assessment

What We Know

- › Clinical competence in nursing is difficult to define and to measure. Although it is generally agreed that clinical competence in nursing is crucial to providing safe and effective patient care, there is no standard definition of the concept.^(1,3,4,5,6,7,8,12,13) Various regulatory bodies have attempted to define clinical competence, as follows:
 - The United Kingdom-based Nursing & Midwifery Council defines clinical competence as “the overarching set of knowledge, skills and attitudes required to practice safely and effectively without direct supervision”⁽⁸⁾
 - The Nursing and Midwifery Board of Australia defines clinical competence as “a combination of skills, knowledge, attitudes, values and abilities that underpin effective and/or superior performance in a professional/occupational area”⁽⁷⁾
 - In Canada, 10 nursing regulatory bodies define clinical competence as “the ability of the registered nurse to integrate and apply the knowledge, skills, judgments and personal attributes required to practice safely and ethically in a designated role and setting”⁽¹⁾
- › Assessment of clinical competence is important to ensure that practicing nurses provide safe and effective nursing care.^(2,10,11) Assessment of competence of all clinical staff is required by The Joint Commission’s (TJC’s) standards for hospital accreditation. According to TJC,^(5,10)
 - the department leader is responsible for ensuring that assessments of competence are completed—either by him or herself, by a qualified individual the leader designates to perform these assessments, or by a combination of input from supervisors and direct observation
 - competence assessments should be performed before an employee is hired, during orientation, and then on an ongoing basis
- › Clinical competence assessment in nurses is complicated by a lack of standardized methods. The literature includes reports of a range of strategies employed in the assessment of nursing clinical competence, but evidence supporting their efficacy is generally lacking. In addition, it is unclear what level of performance should be used as the cut-off point for distinguishing competence from incompetence^(3,4,6,9,12,13)
 - A number of instruments that have been developed for assessment of nursing clinical competence, but there is a lack of evidence demonstrating their reliability and validity^(3,13)
 - Although participation in continuing education is widely considered to be an indicator of clinical competence, critics argue that ongoing education does not ensure clinical competence^(3,12)
 - The literature includes several reports of the use of portfolios in the assessment of clinical competence in nursing students. A portfolio is a collection of evidence to demonstrate skills, knowledge, and achievements of the nurse. Although portfolios require self-reflection on the part of the learner, there is a lack of evidence supporting their role in the determination of clinical competence. Among the disadvantages of using this method is potential for bias on the part of the individual charged with assessing the portfolio and low- to moderate inter-rater agreement on portfolio assessment^(3,13)

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- Objective structural clinical examinations (OSCEs) are a series of exercises that a student must complete to demonstrate a range of skills and knowledge. Some evidence suggests that OSCEs are useful in assessing clinical competence, but they tend to be costly and time-consuming in addition to being stressful and intimidating to participants^(3,9,13)
 - Although peer review is associated with a number of potential benefits—including reinforcement of the nurse’s knowledge and skills, identification of problems, and opportunities to receive feedback from colleagues—evidence supporting its efficacy in determining clinical competence is limited⁽³⁾
 - In addition, direct observation and self-assessment as strategies for assessing competence both lack strong support in the literature, and the results of both approaches are subject to bias^(3,6,11)
- › For information on development of clinical competence, see *Evidence-Based Care Sheet...Clinical Competence Development*

What We Can Do

- › Learn about clinical competence assessment in nursing practice; share this information with your colleagues
- › Collaborate with other nurses in your working environment to implement effective strategies for assessment of clinical competence

Coding Matrix

References are rated using the following codes, listed in order of strength:

M Published meta-analysis	RV Published review of the literature	PP Policies, procedures, protocols
SR Published systematic or integrative literature review	RU Published research utilization report	X Practice exemplars, stories, opinions
RCT Published research (randomized controlled trial)	QI Published quality improvement report	GI General or background information/texts/reports
R Published research (not randomized controlled trial)	L Legislation	U Unpublished research, reviews, poster presentations or other such materials
C Case histories, case studies	PGR Published government report	CP Conference proceedings, abstracts, presentation
G Published guidelines	PFR Published funded report	

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