



Competencies:

an integrated career and
competency framework
for outpatient nurses



Royal College
of Nursing

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BJ Waltho, Chair, RCN Outpatients Nursing Forum.

*Wendy Darwent, Senior Sister, Outpatients,
Royal Liverpool Hospital.*

*Mark Morrison, Outpatients Services Manager,
East Cheshire NHS Trust.*

*Sue Barnden, Service Development Manager,
North Oxfordshire PCT Partnership.*

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of Hospitals Trust, Belfast.*

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Queens Park Hospital, Blackburn.*

*Bernie Cottam, Professional Nurse Adviser,
Royal College of Nursing.*

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Foreword

This competency framework is the result of three years of extensive work and inquiry. It is the product of collaboration between a wide range of health care professionals, as well as the crucial involvement of patients and their carers. The catalyst for this work was the growing number of requests from outpatient nurses for a competency framework that was relevant to them, and which focused on their roles and responsibilities in this unique setting.

During the development of the framework we consulted over 600 outpatient nurses, as well as doctors, patients, carers, specialist nurses and community-based practitioners. This has ensured a comprehensive document that will help nurses to provide a high standard of outpatient nursing throughout the UK.

Although the document has gone through an extensive consultation process, the Forum's steering group would welcome further comments and suggestions from practitioners. We want to ensure that the framework remains current and relevant to those involved in the care of people attending outpatient departments.

BJ Waltho

Chair – RCN Outpatients Nursing Forum
bj.waltho@rbch-tr.swest.nhs.uk

Introduction

Competence can be defined as: “The state of having the knowledge, judgement, skills, energy, experience and motivation required to respond adequately to the demands of one’s professional responsibilities” (Roach, 1992).

The development of this competency framework has taken place in the context of a number of professional and political factors including:

- ◆ Agenda for Change (DH, 1999c)
- ◆ need for leadership in specialist nursing
- ◆ need for the development of standards
- ◆ NHS Plan (DH, 2000) and its equivalent in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland
- ◆ increased focus on work-based and lifelong learning plus supervision
- ◆ changing focus towards professional rather than academic accreditation
- ◆ National Service Frameworks
- ◆ increasing patient and user expectations
- ◆ Future Nurse (RCN, 2003).

The development of the framework was led by the steering group of the Royal College of Nursing (RCN) Outpatients Nursing Forum with the help, motivation and interest of Forum members, and supported by RCN staff. The framework can be used together with other frameworks that highlight core nursing skills and competencies.

Under AfC jobs are evaluated using a job evaluation scheme. This gives each job a weighting that then determines where each job slots into the new pay bands. Common ‘job profiles’ are being finalised across the countries, and where a job fits a profile it is possible to place it straight onto an appropriate new pay band. For jobs that do not automatically fit a profile, trained job evaluators drawn from management and staff carry out the evaluation. Each pay band has to have a number of points. Staff below the maximum point can expect to progress to the next point each year.

There are two points on each pay band called gateways where staff knowledge and skills are assessed using the Knowledge and Skills Framework (KSF). Pay progression at the gateways is linked to the demonstration of applied knowledge and skills to support continuing professional development.

For more comprehensive information on AfC please refer to www.rcn.org.uk/agendaforchange. This site is your guide to the ins and outs of the new pay, terms and conditions for the NHS. It will help you to understand AfC, how it was developed, what you can expect from your new pay, terms and conditions, and how you can make the most of the new system, particularly the KSF. You can talk with your colleagues about the new pay system to strengthen your understanding. To ask questions and debate issues use the RCN’s Discussion Zone on the members-only area – www.rcn.org.uk/members/dz.

Agenda for Change

Agenda for Change (AfC) was implemented in the NHS, across the UK on 1 December 2004, with pay, terms and conditions backdated to 1 October 2004. It was the biggest overhaul of NHS-wide pay, terms and conditions in over 50 years. It applies to all NHS organisations and therefore sets a UK framework for pay, terms and conditions of employment.

AfC will mean that all staff will have clear and consistent development objectives; can develop in such a way that they are able to apply the knowledge and skills appropriate to their level of responsibility; and are helped to identify and develop knowledge and skills that will support their career progression.

1

Benefits of the competency framework

The framework focuses on treatment and care interventions that are heightened or specific to nurses working in outpatient departments (OPD). It is structured around six core characteristics of outpatient nursing:

- ◆ short interaction time with service users in OPD
- ◆ supporting the service user when the message is uncertain
- ◆ diverse specialist interventions, health care and developmental needs of OPD service users
- ◆ multi-skilled interventions
- ◆ discharge planning – the interface between hospital and community
- ◆ health promotion.
- ◆ provide guidance to employers about expectations of competency at different levels of outpatient nursing
- ◆ capture the unique contribution to care that nurses practising in OPD make
- ◆ a framework for career progression in outpatient nursing.

Although this framework is intended to have a stand-alone function, it should also be used in conjunction with other frameworks that focus on the core skills and competencies for all qualified nurses. In addition, the specific frameworks developed by specialist nurses can be used to support and enhance outpatient nursing practice.

The competency levels

The framework has three levels of competency, and has the potential to be cross-referenced with the KSF. The levels are:

Level 1: competent nurse

Level 2: experienced/proficient nurse

Level 3: senior practitioner/expert nurse.

Competencies are cumulative. This means, for example, that a proficient nurse would be expected to achieve their own level of competency statements, in addition to those at the competent level.

The framework can be used in a number of ways to develop nurses' knowledge and skills. For example, to:

- ◆ help individual nurses plan their professional development

The building blocks for professional development

The clearly defined competency levels make it possible for outpatient nurses to identify their level of practice. The framework gives them the ability to plan their careers in a more structured way, and supports their continuing professional development by pinpointing individual development and training needs.

By developing competencies for outpatient and other nursing specialisms, the RCN is providing the key building blocks for improving professional practice in nursing. This will raise the quality of care, and ensure that patients and employers benefit from consistently high standards.

2

How to use the framework

The outpatient nursing framework should be used in conjunction with the generic RCN *Core career and competency framework* (RCN, 2006). When you use this framework with the core competencies you will also be able to meet the requirements of key strategic developments such as The Essence of Care, the NHS Knowledge and Skills Framework and the Higher Level of Practice.

The framework should be used as a developing, empowering and aspirational tool as well as a means of managing performance within professional development and appraisal schemes. The framework also gives you the opportunity for creativity and flexibility. As an outpatient nurse you can complete core nursing competencies, and use the framework as part of a career portfolio.

As a practitioner you will be required to produce evidence for each competency in order to demonstrate that you have achieved the competence at the identified/desired level. Forms of evidence that you can use include case histories, self-appraisal via a reflective diary, 360 degree feedback, verification of practice and structured observation of practice.

It is envisaged that a wide range of nurses who practice in an outpatient setting will adopt this framework. These could include nurse specialists working in a wide range of specialities such as diabetes, dermatology, orthopaedics and rheumatology to name only a few. As well as nurses working in secondary care, practice nurses working in primary care could also use the skills and competencies detailed in this document.

Conclusion

Most fields of practice in nursing have an outpatient function as part of the patient journey. The framework will therefore be of use to a significant number of nurses working in an extensive range of settings, and not just those working in OPD.

The framework has been developed specifically by practitioners from all four countries, and it is hoped that it will be widely adopted by nurses from all over the UK. Nurses have been involved in all stages of its evolution and the final document reflects their contribution throughout. The result is a document that is not only valid, but that has ownership by all those involved in its production.