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Practice makes perfect: applying the theory of expertise development on non-medical prescribers’ competencies

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Background: Assessment of competencies, established through competency-based education, underpins the postgraduate independent prescribing courses. The theory of expertise model (“the model”) was originally developed to assess the literature on medical students learning to prescribe and proposes individuals deliberately engage their knowledge, skills and attitudes within a social context (1). A systematic review was conducted exploring whether the model is also applicable to literature on non-medical prescribing.

Method: Six electronic databases (EMBASE, Medline, AMED, CINAHL, IPA and PsychInfo) were searched for 2006-2014. Papers reporting empirical data related to the model’s themes/competencies in relation to non-medical prescribing education/practice were included. Data were extracted using predefined themes from the model and coded using framework analysis.

Results: Twenty-nine studies met the inclusion criteria. Influences on prescribing practice were multifactorial; those applicable to the model were knowledge, undergraduate education, experience, support and confidence. Lack of knowledge in pharmacology and bioscience was attributed to undergraduate rather than postgraduate education or practice. Interventions using experiential learning in comparison to re-enforcing knowledge were seen as more useful with long-term benefits. All studies demonstrated how engaging knowledge and skills affected the individual’s attitude by e.g. increasing professional dignity, which is central to the model. With support from colleagues and adherence to guidelines, non-medical prescribers were able to integrate their competencies within a social context and develop their expertise.

Conclusion: The model demonstrates how knowledge, skills and attitudes are an integral part of learning and prescribing within a complex social context. However, there is a need for stronger foundations in sound scientific knowledge amongst non-medical prescribers, where continuous practice can be made within context to improve skills and strengthen attitudes. This could facilitate a smoother transfer of learnt theory to practice in order for such prescribers to be experts within their fields and not merely adequately competent.