

Educational Supervision in Public Health Specialty Training: Through the eyes of specialty registrars.

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Abstract

Background: Expectations for the roles and responsibilities of educational and clinical supervisors are set out in General Medical Council and Health Education England guidance documents. Models of supervision vary across regional training programmes in The UK. Registrars were surveyed on their expectations for the supervision relationship as part of a new model of supervision for public health specialty registrars in the East of England.

Methods: Registrars were asked to complete an online survey to comment on key areas of the supervision relationship such as operational issues, expectations of the educational supervisor role, registrar responsibilities in the supervision process, and expectations of the relationships between educational and clinical supervisors and the registrar.

Results: Fifteen of the 43 registrars in the region responded to the survey. Educational supervisor responsibilities cited by respondents were sign-off of learning outcomes, review of educational progress and feedback, and assistance with identifying new learning opportunities, within and outside the workplace settings. The value of pastoral support, support with conflict resolution, and the importance of consistency among supervisors across the region was also cited.

Conclusion: There is a wide variation in registrar expectations of educational (and clinical) supervisor roles, potentially related to registrar seniority and competence progression. Expectations include pastoral support and guidance for personal development, in addition to supervision of training progress. Though it is acknowledged that individual relationships are built mutually by supervisors and registrars, registrars need to own the supervision process to drive trainee-led training. There is a need for consistency in approach to assessment and sign-off of learning outcomes by supervisors.

Keywords: Assessment, learning outcomes and supervision.

Article

Introduction

Expectations for the roles and responsibilities of educational and clinical supervisors are set out in the Department of Health Gold Guide; guidance from the General Medical Council on recognition and approval of named supervisors is also now available. (1, 2) Across the country, there is variation in models of supervision set up and used within regional training programmes. Within the Public Health (PH) specialty training programme in the Health Education East of England (HEEoE) region, a new model has recently been

introduced. This model comprises a longitudinal role for educational supervisors where registrars are allocated a single educational supervisor for the full duration of their training, whereas day-to-day supervision is provided or co-ordinated by a clinical supervisor at the registrar’s placement. Oversight of the programme as a whole is provided through other Faculty (Training Programme Director and a small number of deputies, and the Head of the School of Public Health). As part of the introduction of this model, educational supervisors were invited to attend an initial training day in November 2014 which addressed the new requirements for educational supervisors (2-3). This work was carried out to assess registrar views and expectations for the supervision relationship as part of the training event.

Methods

Public health specialty registrars in the East of England were surveyed to obtain their views on educational supervision using an online survey created using Survey Monkey (4). Respondents were asked to comment upon key areas of the supervision relationship (Box 1). Registrar responses were coded and key themes were identified.

Box 1: Key areas of educational supervision explored

Operational issues (frequency/ venue/ method of contact with educational supervisor)
Expectations of educational supervisor role
Registrar responsibilities in the supervision process
Registrar expectations for their relationship with educational and clinical supervisors
Other aspects of the educational supervision process

Results

Fifteen of the forty-three registrars (35%) responded to the survey and all but one provided free-text comments to specific questions. The most frequently occurring responsibilities of educational supervisors cited by respondents were sign-off of learning outcomes, review of educational progress and feedback, and assistance with identifying new learning opportunities, within and outside the workplace settings.

The key themes that emerged from the survey responses were:

Operational issues

Registrar preference for supervision meetings ranged from fortnightly to quarterly with the recognition that frequency could decrease as registrar confidence and capability increases. Face to face meetings were preferred where practical, with a pragmatic mix of telephone and face-to-face meetings when registrars were based at a distance from their supervisor.

Educational supervisor role

Registrars expected educational supervisors to have three main roles:

- a) Pastoral needs such as support with workload monitoring, personal and professional development, acting as a “sounding board”, availability and responsive communication, including that around supervision meetings.
- b) Educational progress: assessment of competence through regular review of registrar collated portfolio evidence and timely sign-off of learning outcomes, development of learning agreements, assurance that registrars are exposed to a range and level of work appropriate to their experience/competence, timely feedback on educational progress, support to plan placement moves, prompt, supportive action for registrars facing problems in a placement, support and advice for professional exam preparation, and knowledge of the educational expectations for registrars.

- c) Individual development such as mentoring and coaching, facilitation of critical reflection, balancing the needs of the registrar with those of the training locality or programme, provision of guidance and support to the registrar in line with the Gold Guide, support for identification of professional development opportunities, provision of careers advice

Registrar responsibilities

Registrars recognised the need to take ownership of the educational supervision meetings through timely development of agendas and documentation, regular updating of the evidence logged in their e-portfolio, maintenance of an accurate supervision action log, familiarity with curriculum requirements to facilitate planning for achievement of learning outcomes, proactive planning for effective use of study leave, regular critical reflection and discussion with the educational supervisor.

Supervision relationships

Registrar responses highlighted the need for the registrars, educational and clinical supervisors to share responsibility for good communication around implementing the objectives in learning agreements. Some responsibilities were felt to be more specific eg. the registrar should be the main administrative link between the three individuals; clinical supervisors should understand what is needed for an educational supervisor to sign-off learning outcomes, ensure project-based work is on track, line manage the registrar, and liaise with the educational supervisor should any problems arise, particularly in the time prior to ARCP; and educational supervisors should ensure that the registrar has opportunities to discuss issues confidentially with them or the clinical supervisor. They should ensure the registrar is kept informed of supervision reports and feedback from clinical to educational supervisor and include registrar presence at their meetings if requested by the registrar.

General issues with the educational supervision process

Registrars were keen to see consistency in implementation of the educational supervisor role across the region, particularly in relation to learning outcome sign-off and assessment of competence. Some concern was raised over the ability to effectively build the educational supervision relationship when supervisor and registrar are based in different geographical locations. Registrars also indicated that they would value sensitive resolution of differences in understanding and opinions between supervisors and registrars.

Discussion

While many of the responses were predictable, there was a great variety in expectations between registrars. In terms of the practical aspects of the supervision process, there was consensus in the desire for supervision meetings to take place face-to-face wherever possible, with flexibility to enable a telephone discussion to take place when a personal meeting was not possible, and a desire for flexibility in adjusting supervision style and meeting frequency to stage of training and experience of registrar.

Registrars were also clear on their own responsibilities within the educational supervision process. Respondents frequently highlighted administrative areas of the process as being a registrar responsibility. The importance of ensuring that the evidence collated against curricular learning outcomes in the registrar e-portfolio is kept up-to-date and that supervision is registrar-led was also highlighted. This is in line with published literature on this topic (5). A hierarchical approach to supervision appeared to be common, with the registrar as a junior partner in the relationship. While this may be entirely appropriate, it was interesting that there were no suggestions of a responsibility to transfer learning from registrar to supervisor!

The responses suggested registrar concerns with certain aspects of the educational supervision model where the registrar was based in a different location to the supervisor. Concerns were also expressed regarding consistency across supervisors in assessment of competence and learning outcomes sign-off. This has previously been reported in the literature, and training of supervisors, as well as using multiple methods for triangulating assessment of competence may be required to improve consistency (6). Potential problems were noted in terms of the ability to build and maintain the supervisory relationship, not solely between registrar

and educational supervisor, but also in the triangular relationship with the clinical supervisor. The responsibility noted by several respondents to maintain good and responsive communication on all sides can mitigate this risk.

More than one respondent suggested that coaching was a primary responsibility of educational supervisors - this is now an expectation of the professional standards expected of all supervisors and supported by the National Leadership Academy. (3, 7).

The limited response rate meant that two thirds of registrars did not provide their perspective on the supervision process. Considering the wide range of responses on responsibilities provided, it may be that these were an underestimate of elements of responsibility. Further work may be required to explore this. The data collection questionnaire used prompts for qualitative comment rather than focussing on quantitative data. It may be that further collation and examination of quantitative data on this topic could better identify weighting and emphasis that registrars may place on specific elements of supervisor and registrar responsibility.

Box 2 – What this study adds

- There is a wide variation in registrar expectations of educational (and clinical) supervisor roles, possibly related to registrar seniority and competence progression.
- There is a need for pastoral support, coaching and mentoring, and guidance for personal development, in addition to supervision of educational progress.
- Registrars have a responsibility to take ownership of the supervision process in the spirit of *trainee-led training*.
- There is a need for educational supervisors to be consistent in assessment of competence and learning outcomes sign-off.

In summary, registrar expectations of the educational supervision process vary, although there are clear distinctions between the roles and responsibilities of registrars, educational and clinical supervisors. Further professional development of supervisors and registrars may be required to resolve this and to address consistency in competence assessment across supervisors.

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