A group of Dutch advanced practice nurses (APNs) describe their process of forming a peer review group (PRG) to share cases and provide feedback to one another. The purpose of the PRG is to help APNs expand their knowledge base and hone their clinical skills, with the ultimate goal of improving patient care.
Defining peer review

Peer review is a systematic process by which one assesses, monitors, and makes judgments about the quality of care provided to patients by others, as measured against established standards of practice.\(^5,6\) Nursing PR is an evaluation of one’s professional nursing practice, including identification of opportunities to improve care, by persons with the appropriate expertise to perform the evaluation.\(^7\)

Because they undergo PR, APNs are a group of healthcare providers (HCPs) whose personal competencies in various nursing specialties are compared—with those of other APNs and with objective criteria—with the aim of improving daily practice.\(^3\) PR, recognized as a measure of accountability and a means to evaluate and improve practice,\(^4\) enhances development of the APN profession and improves the quality of patient care.

Peer review has multiple benefits for APNs. It facilitates an open and safe learning environment. It provides APNs with an opportunity to reflect on questions and problems together. Because of the interactive setting, APNs invariably learn something new.\(^8\) PR even offers APNs a break in an otherwise hectic workday. PR can help APNs evaluate the quality of care they have delivered, and gain insight into their greatest strengths and weaknesses as HCPs. With feedback and recommendations from the group, APNs can gain new knowledge and improve their skills.

Creating and working as a PRG

Because the APN profession is relatively new in the Netherlands, the nursing education department of the Erasmus Medical Center Rotterdam had no experience in starting or structuring a PRG. Five years ago, five pioneering APNs working on an internal medicine unit decided to create such a PRG. These APNs found several examples of PRGs in the literature and took the initiative in creating a framework, based on non-empirical research, that took into account the criteria requisites of the DNSRB.

To initiate an effective PRG, some basic steps are essential. The first step is to form a group of 3-5 APNs in the same specialty who have similar interests within their specialty. The next step is to elect a chair to serve a 1-year term. The chair then makes a yearly schedule so that members can plan to attend all PRG meetings. To meet the criterion of spending 40 hours in the PRG over 5 years, the group must meet for about 2 hours every 3 months.

At each meeting, members take turns serving as the contributor, who presents a case related to her work field. One week before the meeting, the contributor sends a recap of the case—along with corresponding literature, protocols, and guidelines—to PRG members so that they can read background material and analyze the case. Each case submitted for PR must have these elements:

- The patient’s presenting complaint, personal and family health history, and physical examination findings;
- An analysis of the case, with corresponding literature or guidelines to clarify or substantiate the diagnosis or the problem;
- A list of dilemmas that can occur or that did occur with the presented case, as well as learning points, and
- Learning objectives extracted from the presented case for discussion.

At the meeting, the contributor uses PowerPoint to present the case and then leads the discussion regarding dilemmas and learning goals. A member who is appointed secretary for each meeting takes
notes and creates a report of the thoughts and views exchanged during the meeting. The report includes a summary of the case, the learning goals of the contributor, and feedback/recommendations from the group. After the meeting, the report is sent to the PRG members. Reports of PRG meetings are saved in a digital portfolio.

At the next PRG meeting, notes of the previous meeting are discussed. The chair asks the previous contributor whether she used feedback from the last PRG meeting and applied it to her practice. The process gives the contributor an opportunity to reflect on her own goals and improve the quality of her work.

Choosing the best method to present a case
Within the first year of the PRG's existence, all five members had submitted a case. The group then met to determine the best format for presenting a case. The PRG considered three options: the testing method, the Balint method, and the research method. These methods were evaluated in terms of whether they enhanced the professionalism of the APN through the sharing of knowledge, expertise, and thoughts. The group was most satisfied with the testing method, which is particularly suitable for case study discussion and for evaluation of clinical guidelines and protocols. With this method, the group works together, sharing ideas and coming to an agreement on how practice can be improved. One downside of the testing method is that the personal learning goals of the APN are not included.

Gaining competencies
In the Netherlands, the focus of learning is to gain competencies. A framework used for the competency-based approach is that of the Canadian Medical Education Directives for Specialists (CanMEDS) (Figure).9 The CanMEDS framework describes seven different roles of an HCP: professional, communicator, collaborator, manager, health advocate, scholar, and, in the center, medical expert. APNs who have gained the first six competencies can become medical experts (the center of the honeycomb), but they cannot become medical experts if they fail to gain one of the six competencies surrounding the central competency. APNs need to enhance themselves in all seven competencies in order to become better HCPs.

Achieving the best practice
A combined framework using both the testing method and the CanMEDS framework was determined to be the best practice. This combined framework was deemed to be the best way to prepare a case for discussion and to give the PRG and the contributor the clearest insight into the questions and learning issues provided by the case. The testing method is an ideal way to discuss problems or questions regarding certain procedures and guidelines within the safe confines of a group. In addition, each group member can impart information and share expertise via the group discussions, which can then be absorbed by the other members and translated into their own practices.
Discussion
The PRG found that, over a 4-year period, a combined approach—the testing method and the CanMEDS framework—constituted the best practice for structuring a case for discussion and determining the contributor’s own learning issues. The DNSRB also recommends use of CanMEDS competencies in this regard. If the combined framework does not work well for a given PRG, it may be related to poor group dynamics, lack of a safe environment, or a tendency for members discussing a case to highlight their feelings rather than their own practice. Some PRG members indicated that they sometimes felt vulnerable. It takes courage to learn from colleagues. According to Karas-Irwin and Hoffmann, a caring environment imbued with genuine respect enhances PRG interactions. By participating in a PRG, APNs in the Netherlands not only meet the needs and criteria of the DNSRB, but also enhance their professional skills and build their knowledge base.

Implications for APNs in the United States
Although there is no specific requirement to participate in PR as part of APN licensure in the United States, PR is recognized as an important component of practice and professional responsibility. The opportunity to come together as a small group of APNs with similar clinical practices and interests on a regular basis to review challenging cases provides a collegial environment for learning from each other. Peer assessments can play an important role in enhancing quality of care for complex patients with multiple interrelated chronic conditions, especially as seen in the U.S. with its aging population and the increasing prevalence of obesity and its co-morbidities.

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