

Assessment of a Professional Competence of Healthcare Personnel

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Abstract: The role of health care personnel in any medical institution is particularly important. Staff as a resource is the most important and valuable capital that ensures the continuous and systemic functioning of the institution, its development in perspective. The competence and attitude of the employees determine the satisfaction of clients and patients and the outcome of treatment. Therefore, this is necessary for every medical institution to raise professional qualification and training of staff by raising their professional competence. High professionalism increases confidence of clients in medical personal and it manifests the best practice in a particular hospital. The professional development and a lifelong learning of healthcare professionals play a key role according to the requirements of the professional competence of medical personnel. Different EU countries apply different approaches and experience in determining the levels of professionalism in choosing criteria of assessment of quality of medical personnel. *The aim of the study:* is to explore and to analyse the existing procedures for assessing the professional competence of health care personnel. *The methodology of the study:* For the purpose of this study the authors have carried out a questionnaire with nurses aiming at evaluation of their professional competence. *The results of the study:* The authors of the study have analysed the requirement for the assessment of professional competence of health care staff in a hospital as well as data gained in the questionnaire and designed the competence model. *The significance of the study* is to highlight the importance of raising competence of medical personnel

Keywords: competence, health care personnel, assessment of personnel professional competence.

Introduction

The professional development and a lifelong learning of healthcare professionals play a key role in today's professional competence requirement framework. The professionalism of the staff members must be in line with the development of health services by introducing of new services and new medical technologies. The World Health Organization places great importance on patients' safety, which is linked to the competence of the learning system of staff members (WHO, 2004). The document "Key Competences" emphasizes the importance of knowledge, skills, abilities and attitudes in ensuring one's active participation in knowledge society. This is stated in the document: "... to deserve attributes such as 'key', 'core', 'essential' or 'basic', it must be necessary and beneficial to any individual and to society as a whole. It must enable an individual to successfully integrate into a number of social networks while remaining independent and personally effective in familiar as well as new and unpredictable settings" (Key Competencies, 2002, 14).

Recommendation of the European Parliament in the *European Qualifications Framework (EQF)* for a lifelong learning, defines knowledge and skills that need to be taken into account by the medical personnel (Recommendation of the European Parliament...2018). High professionalism increases public confidence in medical profession and ensures a good practice in a particular hospital (Medical Appraisal Guide, 2013).

Uniform procedures for assessing the professional competence of health care personnel, according to the guidelines for Latvian medical institutions are not available. Each institution analyzes the skills and experience of the staff essential in adapting this system to its specific needs and understandings, which would serve as one of the aspects of the quality management system in management of a personal.

However, the need for the competence of a health care personnel is determined by the Latvian regulatory documents, such as the Medical Treatment Law (2017). The Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Latvia (Procedures for certification...2012) emphasize the compliance of professional activities of medical personal to certain quality requirements and criteria.

The strategic goal of a quality of the health care system is to reform the health care system in order to achieve efficient processes and to set measurable indicators by providing necessary financial resources, achieving the development and maintenance of sufficient human resources and competence. (Ārstniecības personu un..., 2016)

The quality of health care services can be described in a simple way: to do right things and to make the right decisions based on the right information; to perform right manipulations correctly, for the right patient; to apply medicine to the right patient at the right time at a minimal cost (LR, 2017).

The quality is ensured by the healthcare staff according to their level of professional competence. One of the dimensions of the quality of the health care system is a competence of staff members. The competence involves certain skills of the staff members, their ability to perform treatment and care, as well as to respond to non-standard situations. It is not only a matter of education, certification / recertification, and further education, but also practical experience and continuous training of skills and development (WHO, 2009).

By applying the “*structure-process-result*” approach to the health care system as a whole, one of the structural elements that can be identified is the maintenance and improvement of staff’s competence. One of the tools for its implementation should be professional associations that take care of further education and maintenance of competencies of professionals, certification of medical personnel.

Procedures that Regulate the Professional Competence of Health Care Personnel

The composition of the hospital's health care staff is determined by the appointment of professionals for the required positions. Unfortunately, the hospital also faces a shortage of staff at all levels on a daily basis, but it organizes safe health services to patients.

The performance requirements or standards are qualitative or quantitative indicators that must be met in order to perform duties on a permanent or regular basis (Regulations regarding mandatory requirements...2009). In addition to the fulfilment of goals, this is an important criterion for the results of work performance, as it helps to understand the requirements for the performance of ongoing duties and to assess the quality of the performance of these duties (Vintiša, 2011). In a hospital, when implementing a competency assessment system with criteria and values determined by them, they must be initially reflected in job descriptions, so that the employees initially know the performance of their duties, which would be an incentive for the quality of employment.

The position envisages continuous maintenance of competence and a professional development. Opportunities to maintain professional qualifications in each country are defined quite clearly. The professionalism of health care personnel must be at the same level as the constant development of health services by introducing new services and new medical technologies. Medical technologies are being developed rapidly, therefore medical treatment and medical support personal needs continuous improvement of knowledge and skills. The staff must be ready both, to apply technologies and to provide a high-quality and safe medical service to patients. The World Health Organization pays attention to the importance to patients’ safety, by reducing the risk of harm associated with healthcare to a minimum (WHO, 2009), which is related to a learning system of medical staff.

In Latvia, the Ministry of Health offers opportunities for medical staff and provides medical support for the staff to improve their qualifications by providing opportunities for further education (Darbības programmas..., 2016). Training is available in specific areas of professional knowledge areas of treatment, as well as general knowledge and skills.

The Latvian Medical Association and professional associations play an important role in the professional life of doctors, and the professional life of nurses as represented by the Latvian Association of Nurses. The hospital's healthcare staff is involved in a hospital's 'in-house' training program, which is developed for one calendar year. The heads of departments develop training programs by choosing training topics for their activity profile. The hospital develops a close cooperation with Riga Stradiņš University by creating a resident clinical training base that helps clinicians to maintain and to improve their professionalism. Within the scope of their competence, health care personnel voluntarily participate in international events: congresses, conferences, which are highly supported by both employers and professional associations. Theoretically, the procedure for

evaluating managers exists, but there is no practical application of it. There is no interest in the results of the evaluation either from the managers or from the management of the hospital due to the lack of mutual communication. Until 2018, the evaluation procedure was applicable only to hospital managers. The result of the assessment is used as a basis for a decision on the employee's suitability for the position to be held, transfer of the employee to another position. This staff's appraisal is more commonly used in hospital practice for its simplicity, but it is not regular and comprehensive for staff. The coverage of their professional competencies is insufficient, partially uninformative, without matching results with the staff's professional development, motivation for career opportunities, feedback, and a compatible with the remuneration system.

Professional Competence of Health Care Personnel

The term "competence" is used in everyday communication with different meanings - both in as the authority and as a competence, but in a contemporary understanding of a personnel management, most often the term is used to describe employee's behaviour or patterns of action in a typical situation at work. The term describes and explains how work should be done (Vintiša, 2011). In Latvian, the term "competence" means both competence, erudition, or special knowledge, as well as the field of activity, rights and power in a certain field or jurisdiction (Tilde Dictionary of., 2022).

The understanding and the use of the term 'competence' in the Latvian language is determined by the LAS Terminology Commission Decision No. 84 (Par termina "kompetence"..., 2009). The term competence in the Latvian language is used in the singular form with necessary knowledge, professional experience, understanding in a certain field and the ability to use knowledge and experience in a specific activity. The competence of an employee is evaluated by the surrounding people, cooperation partners, and the society.

In the management science, the "competence" characterizes an individual's abilities and skills. The term 'competence' refers to a set of knowledge and skills in the organization. The essence of a concept in jurisprudence means certain responsibilities and areas of authority. M. Gowie and co-authors suggest core competency framework of nurses that includes soft skills as well, such as compassion, interaction skills with others, interpersonal communication skills. The authors argue that the assessment of competencies must be a dynamic process with periodical reviews in order to improve the quality of performance (Gowie et al., 2020). Other researchers emphasize that work in demanding circumstances requires productivity and creativity (Milena et al., 2011). The authors define competencies as a combination of knowledge, skills and behaviours possessed by individuals. In their proposed competency framework, they include such competencies as communication, team building, planning, priority setting, and problem solving competencies along with managerial competencies. M.R. Stanyon and co-authors in their study report that after a detailed exploration of competencies that are necessary for nurses, the authors have identified 22 competencies as essential for nurses in care homes. Among them are relationship-centred care, assessment and care planning, enhancing well-being and maintaining ability, pain management, attentiveness to cultural, spiritual and sexual needs of patients, team working, reflective practice and others, quality improvement and evidence-based practice and others (Stanyon et al., 2017). R. Meretoja and L. Koponen developed a model that compares nurses' optimal and actual competencies in the clinical setting and concluded that this is essential to develop a shared understanding of competency requirements of patient care by combining optimal competence profiles that can contribute to targeted continual learning and educational interventions (Meretoja et al., 2011). As T. Huey-Ming in their study point to the relationship that exist between nurses' competency and performance. Their findings may serve as a guide to improve training programs for nurses with placing greater emphasis on the competencies that are necessary for providing high quality of nursing services (Huey-Ming, 2004).

Uniform procedures for assessing the competence of health care personnel and guidelines for the Latvian medical institutions are not available. Each institution defines the competence, skills and experience of the staff by adapting this term to its specifics, needs and understanding. Most of the staff's competence is related to the compliance to the job description, set of duties, leaving the professional development of the staff and further education under the responsibility of the employee. The implementation and maintenance of the health care quality management system determines the

need for staff competence assessment, purposeful improvement in the provision, implementation and necessity of the basic goals of the health care institution.

The system of performance of personnel is based on competence assessment introduced in the public administration in Latvia and is applied to the medical personnel of the Emergency Medical Service (NMPD). The professional competence of a nurse was explored according to the levels of self-assessment criteria (Miķelsone et al., 2016). The experience of evaluation of health care personnel in Latvia is not widely available, as this process is mostly just stated in the medical institutions. As a mandatory measure, those health care institutions whose quality management systems have been assessed and certified in accordance with the international standard of the LVS EN ISO 9001 "Quality Management Systems. Requirements".

The assessment of medical staff in the United Kingdom is linked to the recertification of medical practitioners and is carried out in accordance with the Medical Appraisal Guide (Medical Appraisal Guide, 2013). In turn, the Indian Institute of Planning and Management offers the use of continuous appraisal systems for the professional appraisal of the staff members (Kundu, 2015).

The aim of the study was to explore and to analyse the existing procedures for assessing the professional competence of health care personnel.

Methodology

The study was carried out in a health care institution - "X" hospital, where 1040 medical staff members have been employed from 2019 to 2021. *The main research questions were:* How do nurses assess their professional competence? How do they link their professionalism to the growth opportunities and how do they maintain it? In order to select the sample, the authors have applied the principle of free choice according to different research methods. The participants of the study were health care professionals. In total, 20 practicing nurses and nine heads of the middle-level departments have participated in the study. A structured questionnaire was developed by the authors of the paper in Latvian, which includes questions aiming to find out the opinion of nurses on the general principles of competence assessment, and the existing procedures in the hospital. The study involved 20 hospital nurses. The experience of work of nurses is more than five years long. The questions were related to the experience of assessment of nurse's competence, or a lack of it, attitudes towards a particular job, desire to link one's professionalism to the growth opportunities or to maintain it formally, development, career development, linking assessment to the hospital's payment system, or by indicating a hindrance to daily work, and the provision of healthcare to patients. The respondents provided the answers to all those questions.

Results and Discussion

According to the collected data, it was found out that the majority of nurses have acquired the 1st level professional higher education; 45% of nurses have received the 2nd level of professional higher education and 15% have completed a nursing school. The length of service of nurses who took part in the survey ranges from 5 to 38 years.

The answers provided by nurses about the competence assessment indicates to a correct understanding of their competence, as evidenced by 95% of nurses. However, by answering the question whether a competence assessment has been performed in the hospital or at their workplace, the nurses answered it in a negative way (60% of cases). 40% of nurses reported about annual assessment of competence in their departments by senior nurses, but this has only been done in the last 2 years. This leads to the conclusion that since the assessment of the competence of all staff introduced in the hospital in 2018, it has been performed only partially.

The analyses of all the answers to the question about the need to assess the competence of staff members, allows to conclude that 90% of nurses indicated to the need to measure the competence. On a question, whether it affects the performance and quality of the nurse's job responsibilities or not, 75% indicated in an affirmative way, while 25% of nurses acknowledged that the assessment of competence would not affect the quality of work performance. It can be concluded that staff would encourage employees to perform their duties better. Identical answers were provided about the

commitment to competence assessment not only through a better performance of job responsibilities, but also through the incentive for career advancement, as it was indicated by the 75% of nurses. In regard to the relationship that exists between the results of the competence assessment and the salary, and if it may affect the quality of the work. The answer was affirmative in 45% of cases and negative in 55% of cases.

As a result of the analyses of the data about the interest of nurses in the professional development, the authors received 30% of negative answers, that indicates that the staff does not feel support, encouragement, while 65% feel interest and support from the management and 5% reported that this is hard to judge.

The answers about the opportunities to participate in the professional development in the hospital indicate that 95% of nurses provided positive evaluation and that nurses themselves participated in the internal training process in the hospital units and (95%) of nurses provided affirmative answers. However, the learning process mostly is related only to the formal acquisition of education, as this is important in a recertification to maintain a professional competence of a nurse.

The summary of the results of the questionnaires allows to conclude that the staff understands the need for assessment by acknowledging that it will affect the quality of work and it leads to a self-growth. Professionalism is associated with the training process, its necessity and participation, but it is formally related to the need for further education and for the maintenance of a certificate.

The expert interviews were agreed with the heads of 9 mid-level departments of the hospital, who expressed their opinion on about the assessment of a competence in the hospital and the opportunities to improve the assessment procedure by examining the competence model proposed by the author (Figure 1) by answering set questions. Respondents support the benefits of staff appraisal at work that would ensure a professional competence, efficiency, and a quality of work.

The respondents reported about the evaluation process in their daily work as a disruptive measure, which is time-consuming, bureaucratic, as it is being carried out formally. However, after the analyses of the author's competence model, the respondents more often expressed their understanding and indicated that the proposed competence assessment procedure is much more purposeful, useful, and understandable and even necessary. The competency model offers a sequence in activities and training of personnel. The model highlights all the factors that influence work responsibilities of the staff, such as professional skills, theoretical knowledge, indicators of health care quality. Therefore, as a result of the discussion, managers pointed to the processes that promote evaluation in daily work: development of training, improvement of quality of work, opportunities to attract the remuneration system, in maintaining communication and feedback between the employee and the management.

In regard to the personnel competence assessment requirements in the regulatory documents, the answers were partially correct. Respondents were familiar with the procedure of registering medical practitioners, professional standards, certification procedures, and were less informed about the connection between the Medical Treatment Law and Cabinet Regulation No. 60 (*Darbības programmas...*, 2009).

The opinion of the experts about the suggested training system in the hospital was quite supportive. The managers reported about a successful implementation of training activities in the hospital, which are implemented with the support of the European Union's European Social Fund within the framework of the non-formal education program for the medical staff. The competency model proposed by the author explains many options for the professional development, by indicating specific opportunities outside training, such as international events, exchange events, participation in research, participation in scientific research, and in the learning processes. In turn, internal training activities should start with the training processes organized by the unit itself, where the employees themselves participate as lecturers. For the training to be successful, this requires simulations, demonstration, and evaluation of the work in special teams, analysis of undesirable events and side effects, performance of work, and a presentation of achievements. The author points to a wide range of opportunities for the participation of a hospital in training process. Financially, by providing compulsory courses, by attracting guest lecturers, and by providing work-based practice for the residents, nurses, and

laboratory assistants. The respondents emphasize that when planning and organizing such training in their structural units, the level of competence of the staff members must be in a high level.

The respondents are willing to use the proposed competency model for the development of an evaluation system in the hospital. The evaluation is positive. The model is detailed, by creating an understanding of the need for the staff competence assessment for both the employee and the hospital. The members are motivated and see the benefits. Managers pointed out that the appraisal of the staff should not be spontaneous. This should be done in a team, guided by specific actions and correct assessments, without offending the employee.

Figure 1 COMPETENCE MODEL

(Author's design)

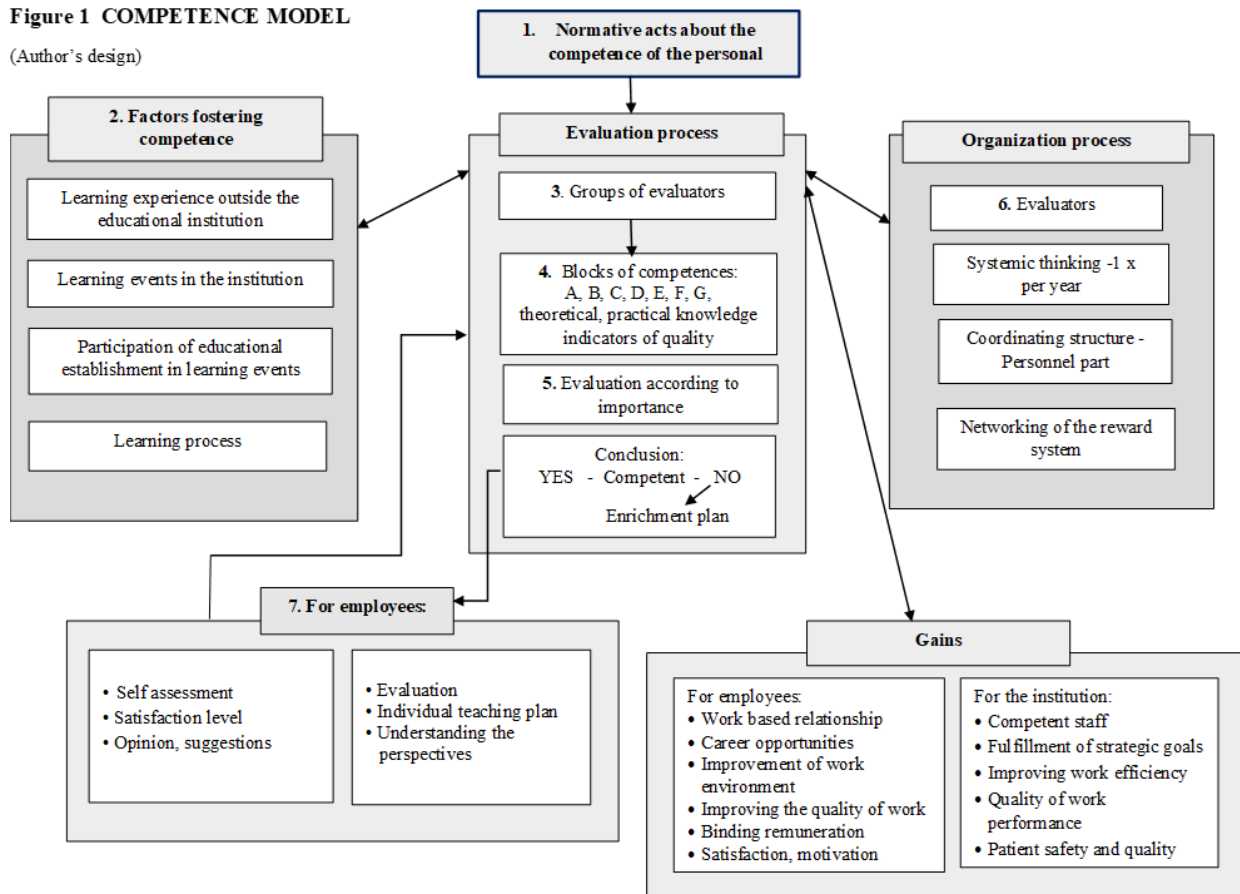


Figure 1. Competence model (Author's design)

The shortcomings of the evaluation system in the hospital that was indicated by the respondents, were as following: the evaluation does not cover all groups of health care personnel positions, the assessment is not systematic; it is formal. Evaluation criteria are not clearly defined, and staff evaluation is not linked to the remuneration system. Managers emphasize that the current appraisal system is confusing and time-consuming. They do not see its usefulness for the employee or the department itself. The lack of competence assessment causes problems with the staff members who do not perform their job duties professionally enough. There is a need for influential tools to motivate the employee to raise their professional development. The staff appraisal system in the hospital does not show the potential of each employee to succeed in their professionalism.

Conclusions

The professional development and a lifelong learning of health care professionals play a key role in today's professional competence requirements. The aim of the study was to explore and to analyze the existing procedures for assessing the professional competence of health care personnel. A campaign-like approach to staff appraisal has no lasting result in the provision of a quality health care services. It does not promote the professional development of staff. The improvement of the competence assessment system can be carried out by developing methodological guidelines, regulations, based on 360-degree surveys, peer assessment, patient feedback, individual self-assessment, situation analysis

and the author's developed competence model. Work on maintaining a comprehensive assessment of staff competence must be continuous, systematic, taking into account its cyclical nature.

The research results allow to conclude that the existing system of competence assessment in the hospital does not allow to assess comprehensively the professional competence of health care staff and employees' potential. The result of the assessment may affect the job performance and a career growth of personnel. In the hospital, the assessment of staff's competence is not systematic, it is formal and does not cover all positions. Its objectives must be mutually beneficial and binding, well-defined and achievable. The staff who must be eligible to carry out evaluation must be direct managers and the representatives of the human resources department. This study was focusing on ensuring the competence of staff through internal policies and good medical practices that would increase professional competence and improve the quality of health care personnel.

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