An NMC guide for students of nursing and midwifery

Protecting the public through professional standards

Welcome to your programme of nursing or midwifery education. Choosing to become a nurse of midwife is a big step, but it means that you are on the way to becoming one of the most important people in society. Patients and the public truly value the work you will be doing when you qualify.

Once you have successfully completed your programme of education, you will need to register with the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) before you can practise as a nurse or midwife.

This leaflet sets out some basic information about the NMC and some guidance for the clinical experience you will undertake during your studies. It is based upon extensive consultation with individual pre-registration students of nursing and midwifery, organisations representing students and lecturers in higher education.

The leaflet should be read in conjunction with advice provided by your higher education institution.

What does the NMC do?

The NMC is the regulatory body for nursing and midwifery. Our purpose is to establish and improve standards of nursing and midwifery care in order to protect the public. These standards are set out in *The NMC code of professional conduct: standards for conduct, performance and ethics*, which the NMC will send to you when you first register. We urge you to get hold of a copy now. You should be able to obtain it through your university. If not, it's on our web site at www.nmc-uk.org

You may not be aware that the standards set by the NMC already apply to you. The level of entry to the programme of education that you are undertaking and the content, type and length of your programme are all part of these standards. The NMC has other key responsibilities which are to:

- maintain a register of qualified nurses and midwives
- set standards for nursing and midwifery education, performance, ethics and conduct
- provide advice and guidance on professional standards
- consider allegations of unfitness to practise due to misconduct, ill health or lack of competence.

Registration and professional accountability

When you successfully complete your course, your higher education institution will notify the NMC that you have met the required standards and that you are eligible for entry on the register. Your course director will also complete a declaration of good health and good character on your behalf. When we have received this information and you have paid your registration fee, your name will be entered on the NMC register and you will be eligible to practise as a registered practitioner. This should take a matter of days.

Registration is not simply an administrative process. The NMC's register is an instrument of public protection and anyone can check the registered status of a nurse or midwife. Registering with the NMC demonstrates that you have met the standards expected of

registered nurses and midwives. It also demonstrates that you are professionally accountable at all times for your acts and omissions.

Professional accountability involves weighing up the interests of patients and clients, using your professional judgement and skills to make a decision and enabling you to account for the decision you make. On rare occasions, nurses and midwives fall short of the professional standards expected of them. The NMC investigates in the public interest any complaints made about the professional conduct or fitness to practise of registered nurses and midwives.

Throughout your career, you will need to keep up to date with developments in your area of practice. Your continuing professional development is an integral part of your professional accountability. In order to continue to practise, you will need to meet the NMC's standards for post-registration education and practice (PREP). Detailed information about PREP is available in *The PREP Handbook*, which you can download from the NMC web site, or obtain free of charge from our Publications Department.

You will also need to complete a notification of practice form when you renew your registration every three years and pay your annual retention fee. Practising midwives also need to complete a notification of intention to practise form annually.

Guidance on clinical experience for students

During your studentship, you will come into close contact with patients or clients. This may be through observing care being given, through helping in providing care and, later, through full participation in providing care. At all times, you should work only within your level of understanding and competence, and always under the appropriate supervision of a registered nurse or midwife, or a health professional with a registered nurse or midwife providing mentorship.

The section below provides some guidance on working with patients or clients during your studies. The principles underpinning this guidance reflect the standards that will be expected of you when you become a registered practitioner.

Your accountability

As a pre-registration student, you are not professionally accountable in the way that you will be after you come to register with the NMC. This means that you cannot be called to account for your actions and omissions by the NMC. So far as the NMC is concerned, it is the registered practitioners with whom you are working who are professionally responsible for the consequences of your actions and omissions. This is why you must always work under direct supervision. This does not mean, however, that you can never be called to account by your university or by the law for the consequences of your actions or omissions as a pre-registration student.

The wishes of patients

You must respect the wishes of patients and clients at all times. They have the right to refuse to allow you, as a student, to participate in caring for them and you should make this right clear to them when they are first given information about the care they will receive from you. You should leave if they ask you to do so. Their rights, as patients or clients, supersede at all times your rights to knowledge and experience.

Identifying yourself

You should introduce yourself accurately at all times when speaking to patients or clients either directly or by telephone. In doing so, you should make it quite clear that you are a pre-registration student and not a registered practitioner. In fact, it is a criminal offence for anyone to represent him or herself falsely and deliberately as a registered nurse or midwife.

Accepting appropriate responsibility

There may be times when you are in a position where you may not be directly accompanied by your mentor, supervisor or another registered colleague, such as emergency situations. As your skills, experience and confidence develop, you will become increasingly able to deal with these situations. However, as a student, do not participate in any procedure for which you have not been fully prepared or in which you are not adequately supervised. If such a situation arises, discuss the matter as quickly as possible with your mentor or personal tutor.

Patient confidentiality

Patients have the right to know that any private and personal information that is given in confidence will be used only for the purposes for which it was originally provided and that it will not be used for any other reason.

If you want to refer in a written assignment to some real-life situation in which you have been involved, do not provide any information that could identify a particular patient or client. Obtain access to patient records only when absolutely necessary for the care being provided. Use of these records must be closely supervised by a registered practitioner and you must follow the local policy on the handling and storage of records. Any written entry you make in a patient's or clients records must be counter-signed by a registered practitioner. You can find more advice about confidentiality in *The NMC code of professional conduct: standards for conduct, performance and ethics*. You should also refer to our *Guidelines for records and record keeping*.

Handling complaints

You will need to be aware of the local procedures for dealing with complaints by patients, clients, or their families, about the treatment or care they are receiving. If patients indicate to you that they are unhappy about their treatment or care, you should report the matter immediately to the person who is supervising your clinical experience or to another appropriate person.

What if I see something I think is wrong?

As a student, you will experience a range of different settings in your practice education placements. You will be well placed to question why something is or is not being done. In some cases, you may see a registered nurse or midwife doing something you feel is inappropriate. Although difficult, you shouldn't ignore the situation. Ask the person or someone else about it.

In some cases, you may be observing what could amount to misconduct. Whether or not this is the case, challenging experienced practitioners' ways of doing things should be

encouraged. This will show you are observing and thinking, and may help a practitioner improve their own practice.

We hope that you will find these notes helpful during your programme and in understanding the important responsibilities you will later undertake as a registered nurse or midwife.

If you need to discuss any of these issues with us, please contact our professional advice service on 020 7333 6541/6550/6553, by e-mail at advice@nmc-uk.org or by fax on 020 7333 6538.

If you would like to find out more about the work of the NMC, our website at www.nmc-uk.org includes copies of all NMC publications, position statements issued by our professional advice service, and further useful information and contacts for students of nursing and midwifery.

Good luck in your programme of preparation for registration and in your future career.

Published by the former United Kingdom Central Council for Nursing, Midwifery and Health Visiting in July 1998
Reprinted by the Nursing and Midwifery Council in April 2002
Updated by the Nursing and Midwifery Council in December 2005