

The role of the practice nurse

KENNETH MOURIN, FRCGP

General Practitioner, Dereham, Norfolk; Practice Nurses' Course Tutor, Norwich City College; Norwich District RCGP Tutor

SUMMARY. No definitive syllabus of practical skills for the practice nurse has been published. I describe some specific educational objectives for the use of these skills, tested recently in a course for practice nurses. The topics they cover include: preventive measures, diagnostic tests, patient treatment, patient care (that is, conditions requiring extended patient contact), and treatment room management.

Introduction

THE lack of a defined syllabus of practical skills for practice nurses has meant that both doctors and nurses may have been unaware of the potential for expanding the nurse's professional role. The absence of formal programmes has meant that teaching for the practice nurse has been fragmented, often going by default. Formal courses are not within the remit of area health authorities, they do not coincide with the needs of community nurses, and general practitioner employers have few resources, and little time and teaching experience to formulate training schedules.

Expectations that authoritative programmes might be defined (Royal College of Nursing and RCGP, 1974) have been unmet (Panel of Assessors for District Nurse Training, 1976) or even denied on the grounds that "lists are by nature limiting" (Royal College of Nursing and Society of Primary Health Care Nursing, 1979).

Aim

The content of a training course, designed by a small subcommittee of the East Anglia Faculty of the Royal College of General Practitioners in collaboration with their practice nurses, is described. Specific educational objectives for the use of practical skills are detailed; an evaluation of the course is published in this issue (Mourin, 1980).

Objectives of the course

For brevity, the words "The practice nurse should . . ." are omitted before each specific objective.

1. Preventive measures

a) Immunization and vaccination

- i) understand the importance of immunity for individuals and the community.
- ii) know primary and booster immunization schedules for children, special groups at risk, and overseas travellers; and know sources of up-to-date information.
- iii) know local addresses of yellow fever immunization centres.
- iv) know International Certification requirements and procedures.
- v) search for any contra-indication to immunization before undertaking any procedure.
- vi) be able to advise on duration of protection, side-effects, complications, and after care.
- vii) undertake administration of vaccines by intradermal, subcutaneous and intramuscular routes, and by multiple pressure technique.
- viii) know sources of supply for each vaccine, and its storage.
- ix) complete claim forms, computerized clinic forms, and medical records.
- x) be able to handle and dispose of infected material and instruments safely.

b) Desensitization procedures

- i) understand desensitization schedules laid down, and plan treatment course with patient.
- ii) seek contra-indications before each procedure, including previous local and general allergic responses, immediate and delayed; check that pre-injection anti-histamines have been taken, if ordered.
- iii) administer vaccines correctly.
- iv) use appropriate storage conditions and disposal of used materials.
- v) have emergency tray ready at all times, be prepared to administer drugs in emergencies, and institute resuscitative measures.
- vi) reiterate advice on further management and precautions.

c) Cervical smears

- i) be able to inspect the cervix using a speculum, take a cervical smear, label, prepare, fix and dry the specimen, completing the appropriate forms and records.
- ii) complete the examination by a bimanual vaginal examination, searching routinely for abnormalities from vulva to pelvic organs, reporting abnormalities.
- iii) advise patient how to ascertain results, and on follow-up intervals.

d) Breast examination

- i) perform and teach breast examination by inspection and palpation.

2. Diagnostic tests

a) Haematological investigations

- i) be able to select and label correctly the appropriate tubes for a wide range of blood tests requested by the doctor.
- ii) perform venepuncture efficiently in different sites and in patients of different ages.
- iii) use a centrifuge and pipette for plasma separation.
- iv) be aware of the dangers of bloodborne disease to the operator, maintain adequate hygiene, and dispose of contaminated material safely.
- v) complete request forms completely and accurately, know safety regulations for postal transmission of specimens, and directions for transportation to laboratory.
- vi) be able to read a Westergren erythrocyte sedimentation rate.

b) The electrocardiogram

- i) understand the basic purpose and uses of the electrocardiograph, the care and maintenance of the machine, be able to fit new paper rolls, clean, and pack away ready for re-use.
- ii) be able to record a standard 12-lead electrocardiogram.
- iii) understand the sources of interference and undertake simple fault finding.

c) The peak flow meter

- i) understand the purpose of the instruments, their correct use, maintenance, and cleansing.
- ii) demonstrate to and instruct patients, measure and chart peak flow rates in the long-term management of obstructive airway disorders.

d) Audiometry

- i) be able to use and record pure tone audiometer hearing tests.

e) Testing urine and taking swabs

- i) be able to use all currently available surgery tests, including pregnancy tests, and record results.
- ii) advise on midstream urine and 24-hour specimen collection and transmission to laboratories.
- iii) take plain and charcoal swabs appropriately, use transport media where indicated; complete forms and transmit to laboratories.

3. Patient treatment

a) Therapeutic injections

- i) be able to obtain, prepare, administer and record therapeutic injections as required.
- ii) be fully aware of the hazards to patient and nurse.
- iii) seek contra-indications and previous reactions before any procedure.
- iv) deal with reactions, and advise patients on aftercare.

b) Varicose and other ulcers

- i) be conversant with modern theories of the causes and prevention of varicose ulceration, of occlusive treatment and the dangers of sensitization.
- ii) be aware of the range of materials available for use, and their indications.

c) Ear syringing and cleansing

- i) understand the indications for and precautions regarding ear syringing.
- ii) undertake ear syringing and dry mopping safely.

d) Techniques and materials for suturing

- i) know the varieties of suture available, their usage, and sources for obtaining them.
- ii) understand the principles of skin apposition and reduction of stress, and be able to identify those lesions likely to involve deep structures or critically important structures (e.g. the hand) where the doctor should be consulted, or the patient referred directly to an accident and emergency department, if necessary.
- iii) be able to prepare trolleys and trays for wound cleansing and repair.
- iv) be able to use a variety of suturing techniques and materials (including noninvasive procedures using 'Steristrips') appropriate to different sites and wounds; tie knots by hand and instrumental techniques; dress and protect wounds.

e) Use and application of splints and cervical collars

- i) be able to prepare and apply plaster-of-paris and other splints to limbs.
- ii) be able to prepare and supply soft cervical collars.

f) *Changing pessaries*

- i) be able to insert and fit correctly ring pessaries, advising on further care and follow-up.
- ii) check for complications e.g. vaginal ulceration and infection, at follow-up.

4. Patient care

(This group was separated from the above as requiring extended or continuing patient contact.)

a) *Medical history and basic data recording*

- i) be able to interview new patients and obtain basic personal and family histories, recording them in the appropriate forms and sequence.
- ii) undertake preliminary measurements and investigations for the basic data record.
- iii) explain the purpose and results of the above to the patients, ensuring follow-up where necessary.
- iv) encourage a positive attitude to health and self-management of minor conditions, with an explanation of practice organization and the use of nurse and doctor.

b) *Setting up and running clinics*

- i) be able to select appropriate conditions (e.g. obesity, oral contraception, diabetes, hypertension) for clinic management in the practice, understanding the need for agreement with doctor on criteria for nurse's management of these conditions, and for the reporting back of normal and abnormal results.
- ii) select appropriate time intervals for the work involved, and conceive the organizational details of preparation and continued management of clinics.
- iii) understand the importance of obtaining co-operation of appointment staff and clerical assistants.

c) *Dietary instruction*

- i) be able to give dietary advice to obese adults and children, to obese maturity-onset diabetics, insulin-dependent diabetics, those requiring high-roughage diets, and patients with colostomies.
- ii) know the general principles of dietetic management, the availability and sources of diet sheets and handouts, and when further specialist help is needed.

d) *Simple physiotherapy and rehabilitation*

- i) be able to instruct patients and relatives on physiotherapy techniques in hemiplegia, osteoarthritis of the hip, frozen shoulder, and on breathing exercises, postural drainage, back and quadriceps exercises, and keeping fit generally.
- ii) advise on the lifting and handling of heavy or disabled persons.
- iii) be aware of the aims of rehabilitation, the aids and appliances available, and their sources.

e) *Management of cystitis*

- i) advise on the acute management and prevention of recurrent urinary tract infections.

f) *First aid*

- i) be conversant with first aid measures for emergencies (epistaxes, foreign bodies in orifices, fractures, sprains and strains, bites and stings).
- ii) recognize the indications for major resuscitative procedures (external cardiac massage, mouth-to-mouth respiration) and be able to use them effectively.

5. Treatment room management

a) *Sterilization and maintenance of equipment*

- i) be able to sterilize by boiling or by immersion in sterilizing fluids.
- ii) maintain equipment ready for immediate use.

b) *Maintenance of stocks*

- i) take full control of maintenance of correct amounts of stock of equipment, dressings, and drugs in treatment room, know their sources, identify levels of usage and rates of re-ordering, maintaining a stock order system which minimizes waste and expense.
- ii) understand the purpose and content of the Drug Tariff book, and be able to select items which are used and may be used in future in the practice, with appropriate ordering techniques.

c) *Maintain doctors' bags*

- i) review bags and cases used by doctors, the purpose of their contents, and devise and carry out regular checks of contents and functioning of equipment.

Conclusion

The programme outlined is not claimed to be definitive; rather, it is a base for discussion and for expansion, for general practitioners, their nursing colleagues, and organizers of educational courses for both.

References

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Addendum

Members of the course design team were: Mrs S. Green, Mrs F. Shivelton, Mrs J. Thrower; Drs B. S. Cole, A. Leaman, K. A. Mourin, and D. M. Welch.