

## Developing a national system to guide the continued competence assessment of registered nurse prescribers in Ireland

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**Objective:**

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The purpose of this study was to develop a regulatory guidance system to support registered nurse prescribers maintain their continued competence.

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**Methods:**

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Nursing practice and regulation is going through a period of unprecedented change. Recent practice expansion has been coupled with significant changes to legislation governing self regulating health professionals nationally and internationally. The research method used in this study was action research. This methodology was employed to ensure democratic participation from multiple stakeholders in constructing this new regulatory guidance. Action research is identified as a practice based and change orientated approach to knowledge and theory development within the research literature. This method was considered congruent with research designed to change nursing regulatory guidance and nursing practice. Data was collected between April and December 2008 using focus group interviews with the following participant groups, Registered Nurse Prescribers, Patient representative groups, Nursing unions and Directors of Nursing. Following the introduction of draft continued competence guidance based on initial findings, follow up individual interviews were conducted with Registered Nurse Prescribers to test and evaluate the effectiveness of the draft guidance/intervention in practice.

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**Results:**

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Data was analysed using manual thematic analysis. This was augmented by analysing all the focus group interviews using the Qualitative software programme "NVivo". The findings were unambiguous, they indicated that continued competence assessment should be introduced and it is the responsibility of An Bord Altranais as the regulatory authority for nurses and midwives to develop and implement this system nationally. The rationale for having the system within a changing healthcare environment was identified as patient protection, risk reduction, increased quality patient care, increased trust and confidence in the system and continued personal and professional development for the practitioner. The results indicate the need for a standardised national system with specific benchmark requirements which should be subject to local and national management and scrutiny. The results clearly advocated for a portfolio based approach for the collection and demonstration of competency evidence. The findings clearly recommend triangulation of competence assessment data and sources within the practice setting of the practitioner incorporating self-assessment, peer assessment and patient/consumer assessment evidence. The system should be time effective and provide subjective / objective evidence in this regard and it must be augmented by practice development and patient outcome data captured through audit. Competence assessment should be mandatory and linked to registration, findings were less clear in relation to the relationship between continued competence and fitness to practise proceedings.

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**Conclusions:**

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The project generated a regulatory guidance system and conceptual model to support registered nurse prescribers maintain their continued competence. The draft portfolio developed and tested in this research is being provided as guidance to all Registered Nurse Prescribers. The findings from this study will become a pilot study to test this regulatory activity with a sample of the total population of registered nurses and midwives in Ireland. The findings demonstrated a commitment from the profession and the public to the concept of continued competence. It also demonstrated the invaluable role played by the public in determining regulation policies designed to protect them.