

MEDICINES INFORMATION: A CO-ORDINATED NATIONAL APPROACH TO COMPETENCY-BASED PRACTICE

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The United Kingdom Medicines Information competency framework was launched in September 2001.

This article describes how it was developed and how it is being used in practice

The message from the Royal Pharmaceutical Society is clear: all pharmacists must engage in continuing professional development (CPD). In two years, CPD will be mandatory for pharmacists as we join other health care professional colleagues in meeting the requirements of clinical governance within the National Health Service.

How do we know whether we are competent practitioners? How can we identify our continuing professional development needs? How can we ensure that as individuals we are contributing towards the highest quality of care for patients? The United Kingdom Medicines Information Service (UKMi) has addressed these questions by developing a competency framework. This concept is already familiar to preregistration trainees and recently it has been introduced to other specialties within the profession, including primary care pharmacy, clinical pharmacy and community services pharmacy.

HOW WAS THE MI FRAMEWORK DEVELOPED?

Generally speaking, a competency framework is a collection of competencies that are thought to be central to effective performance. Although there is no definitive definition of a competency there are two main ideas that repeatedly occur in definitions.¹ These are, "task-based" competencies and "behavioural" competencies (see Panel 1).

In practice, competency frameworks contain a mix of both types. To begin identifying competencies for all medicines information (MI) pharmacists we took a behavioural approach since it was more suited to the MI role. Here, we briefly outline the development process.

The MI framework is designed to be relevant to all MI pharmacists from basic



The MI competency framework is designed to be relevant to all medicines information pharmacists

grade rotational pharmacists through to MI centre managers and specialist MI pharmacists. Many of the competencies are also relevant to others who provide information on medicines, for example, MI technicians, and hospital and community pharmacists.

The development process involved focus groups and interviews with a wide range of MI pharmacists, plus senior pharmacy managers and regular users of the MI service (both primary and secondary care-based). The aim was to develop a framework that was relevant to current MI practice and also to future roles for MI pharmacists.

Once an initial framework was developed it was validated to ensure that potential users "recognised" the competencies within it and that it was comprehensive.

As a result of the development process the MI competency framework contains a

comprehensive collection of behavioural competencies, based on wide ranging experience, which are relevant to all those working within medicines information.

WHAT CAN THE MI FRAMEWORK BE USED FOR?

The MI framework has four main uses:

- As a tool to facilitate individual continuing professional development
- In training and development, to help individuals and managers identify training needs and to inform the development of local and national training programmes
- To assist with performance review
- To help inform the recruitment processes

Panel 1: Two different views of competency

Task-based competencies Essentially descriptions of work tasks or job outputs, which have their origins in national training schemes, eg, national vocational qualifications. A task-based competency is often described as a competence and associated with achieving a specific standard.

Behavioural competencies Thought of as underlying characteristics of individuals, which result in effective performance. They are described as a combination of knowledge, skills, motives and personal traits. Competency in this sense is generally evident in the way that someone behaves.

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INTRODUCING THE FRAMEWORK

The MI competency framework has four main areas of competency. These are:

- Delivering the MI service
- Working with people
- Working with information
- Seeing the wider context

Each of the competency areas contains three to four different competencies. For example, the competency area of “delivering the MI service” contains the competencies:

- Delivering the work
- Ensuring quality
- Managing information resources
- Developing the service

Each of the 13 competencies is structured in the same way. Each competency has an overarching statement, which represents the flavour of what the competency is about. Underneath each overarching statement is a number of specific statements, known as behavioural indicators. These represent how MI pharmacists who are demonstrating this competency should be behaving in practice.

Each competency is also split into two levels. Level one for junior MI pharmacists and level two for senior MI pharmacists. Each level has different behavioural statements (Panel 2).

The framework is available on the UKMi website at www.ukmi.nhs.uk.

IMPLEMENTATION

The competency framework was launched at the UKMi Conference in September 2001 (*PJ*, 20 October 2001, p567). To accompany the launch, supporting information was prepared with examples and case studies illustrating how the framework could be used for CPD, performance review and recruitment.

Panel 2: Understanding the competency levels

- The levels are incremental — it is expected that a pharmacist new to MI will start at level one and then, as he or she specialises and assumes more responsibility for delivery/provision of the service, will move to level two.
- The levels have not been attached to specific job grades because this may differ locally but, as a general rule, it is expected that senior, experienced MI pharmacists will have developed all the level one competencies.
- Unlike level one competencies, it may not be appropriate for all senior MI pharmacists to have all level two competencies. This gives the framework local flexibility and allows individual MI centres to “attach” the competencies to the roles they have in their organisations. For example, some of the level two competencies can be described as “advanced” MI practice competencies while others may be MI management competencies. In one MI centre, a senior pharmacist may be expected to have both management and advanced practice competencies, and in another centre, a senior pharmacist may have mostly advanced practice competencies.

This support pack has since been augmented with further case studies and is available on the UKMi website.

A national implementation group was set up comprising representatives from each UKMi region. The purpose of this group was to plan implementation strategies within each region, and to identify key contacts and target groups. Training materials in the form of slides and workshops were provided to facilitate the process. Six months after the national group first met, a second meeting reviewed progress and explored the successes and the learning points along the way (see Panel 3). Already, in local MI centres, the framework is being used as part of individual CPD and as a tool for identifying the training needs of basic grade pharmacists and new MI staff. In one regional MI centre, the MI team has monthly CPD sessions based on sections of the competency framework. In another centre the framework has been used to help in the selection and recruitment of MI staff.

The competency framework is also a useful tool for identifying and planning training

needs. The national introductory training course for MI pharmacists was revised at the end of 2001 and the programme is now based around the level one competencies. The framework provides a logical structure to the course and enables participants to measure their competency before and afterwards. An advanced training programme for MI pharmacists based on the level two competencies is now being developed.

CONCLUSIONS

The introduction of the medicines information competency framework has been a major advance for the UKMi network. The framework provides a focus for CPD and a structure for developing as individuals both within the MI service and within the NHS as a whole. Acceptance and recognition of the value of the framework has been high within the MI community and senior pharmacy management. As described above, the competency framework is already proving to be a valuable tool for many aspects of the service and will facilitate realisation of the UKMi’s strategic aims stated in “Better information for managing medicines”.²

Many challenges lie ahead. After the initial buzz of excitement, the framework must not be allowed to line filing cabinets but instead must be at the heart of all MI services. It must tie in with the professional requirements for CPD from the Royal Pharmaceutical Society. It must also integrate with other competency frameworks as these develop. Above all, MI pharmacists must demonstrate that we really are competent practitioners providing the highest possible service to our patients.

REFERENCES

1. Whiddett S, Hollyforde S. The competencies handbook. London: Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development; 1999.
2. Better information for managing medicines. A strategy for pharmacy’s medicines information service in the NHS. UK Medicines Information; 2000.

Panel 3: Successes and learning points from regional implementation of the UKMi competency framework

What worked well

- Giving ownership to MI pharmacists
- Involving pharmacy education and training colleagues
- Engaging with senior pharmacy managers
- Doing the groundwork first, eg, setting up a focus group and involving senior pharmacy managers
- Allowing dedicated time for CPD within the department
- Dedicating time at regional MI meetings to explain the competency framework and to practise using it

Lessons learnt

- Uptake can be slow
- Need to maintain the momentum and keep it on people’s agendas
- Do not assume prior knowledge or understanding of CPD or recruitment and appraisal processes
- If possible access outside “expertise” to facilitate implementation, eg, CPD regional facilitators, human resources experts
- Keep sessions on the competency framework simple and get to grips with it yourself before trying to train others
- CPD applies to all members of the MI team so include all staff groups