The NHS recognises the importance of the role of continuously improving the clinical assessment skills of clinicians to promote patient safety and prevent simple preventable medical and medication errors occurring. There is a need to support a constructive use of assessment to embed a pervasive and proactive culture of patient safety in practice, starting with the trainee and extending out into the practice years.

NES provides two days of training in Clinical Skills for Pharmacists - Consultation Skills training (one day) and core Clinical Assessment Skills (CAS) (one day). In addition, they provide training in advanced Clinical Assessment Skills for those pharmacists who have undertaken the core CAS training detailed above, and wish to further develop their skills in relation to cardiovascular, respiratory, musculoskeletal and endocrine systems.

So far the training has been targeted at pharmacists who have undertaken a non medical prescribing qualification, to assist them in their clinical practice. The plan is to roll this training out further to support all pharmacists in their expanding pharmaceutical care roles with direct patient assessments.

The NES Clinical Skills courses ensure a consistent and standard way of training pharmacists for their extended clinical role throughout Scotland, which again impacts on patient safety.

Anne Watson, Assistant Director, Pharmacy.
In order to properly assess a heart failure patient it was necessary to learn the diagnosis and examination side of the job – how to listen to a person’s chest to check for a pulmonary oedema or to listen to their heart sounds.

CAS Trainee, Pharmacist

Impact on Patient Safety

Clinical interventions, by pharmacists, may be limited for those pharmacists who have not attended training as they are relying on verbal responses given by patients without any physical examination. Such limited intervention may lead to medication errors. For example, if a patient with heart failure responds to questioning which suggests they have ongoing fluid retention and breathlessness at night, a pharmacist who has attended the clinical assessment skills training would be able to examine them and be more confident in making the necessary adjustments to their medication, than have to refer them to their GP. The benefit for the patient is that the care process is now safer and more streamlined.

I’ve tried to incorporate more clinical examination for my patients into practice….From a safety point of view I’m a little happier for myself and for the safety of the patients. If I’m slightly concerned about the feedback they’ve given me I can listen to their chest and can listen for crackling or whatever else may be suggestive of oedema or an infection. As a result a little bit of extra risk is taken out of the prescribing process for myself and it’s a little bit more efficient for the patients.

CAS Trainee, Pharmacist

Importance of Clinical Assessment Skills Training

Building a Health Service Fit for the Future (2005) describes a fundamental shift in ways of working to ensure care is quicker, more personal and closer to home. The report also stressed reducing inequality, providing more local treatment, improving patient safety and developing new clinical roles. One of the key issues for widening clinical skills amongst healthcare workers such as pharmacists, is the need to enhance patient safety and reduce clinical errors, against the backdrop of adverse events and potential litigation.

Even though these are only short courses, participants found the content to be rich and useful. The advanced CAS (Cardiovascular) course covered heart sounds, breath sounds, general cardiovascular examination, looking at the colour of the patient, and examining their ankle and abdomen for oedema. Participants also found the course to be more effective as they have to practice on real patients. At the end of the training, trainees are assessed and provided with feedback on what all the assessors at each station thought about the trainee’s clinical assessment skills.

My feeling from this course is that it is just a starting point and that the only way to truly do it properly is to go out and practice it. This might be under supervision in the first place. The course does not necessarily make you competent but it gives you the knowledge and skills to do examinations.

CAS Trainee, Pharmacist

After attending the course, some pharmacists have reported that they are able to identify cases where a patient has deteriorated clinically and have then adjusted the patient’s medication. This would not have been possible without the CAS training provided by NES. If such patients end up in hospital due to an error in clinical judgement this can be a huge burden for both the patient and the NHS – the average length of stay for a heart failure patient is 12 days.

Learning and Practice

The clinical assessment skills training can only be seen as a starting point for learning, and follow-up training may provide further evidence of the impact this has on patient safety.

Further information from:
http://www.nes.scot.nhs.uk/disciplines/pharmacy

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