The new professional competence scheme places a legal duty on doctors to maintain their professional competence by following requirements set by the Medical Council. This comes into effect in May 2011 and as a result it is now obligatory for every practising GP to conduct at least one audit per year, in order to comply with the requirements of professional competence. This brief guide is written to help you conduct an audit in your practice that will help meet these requirements.

What is clinical audit?
Audit is a quality improvement process, which seeks to determine if we are doing what we should be doing, and the findings are intended for use at a local (practice) level. In the Medical Council’s Professional Competence guidance booklet, clinical audit is defined as the ‘systematic review and evaluation of current practice with reference to research-based standards (and designed) to improve patient care’. The setting of standards, the measurement of practice compared to a ‘gold standard’, the identification of deficiencies and addressing deficiencies (closing the loop) are the accepted components of clinical audit.

The Medical Council rules specify, however, that audit activities should be focused on the practice of the practitioner and not on the processes. Clinical audit has three elements:
• Measurement – measuring a specific element of clinical practice
• Comparison – comparing results with the recognised standard/guideline
• Evaluation – reflecting on outcome of audit and where indicated, changing practice accordingly.

How to carry out an audit
• Choose your topic
• Define your aims and objectives
• Set your guidelines, state your criteria and set your standard (note that the criteria are elements of care or activity, which can be measured; your standard – sometimes known as your target – is your desired level of performance and is usually stated as a percentage)
• Collect your data
• Analyse and interpret your data
• Decide on what changes need to be made and implement them
• Re-audit your practice.

The report from your audit may be anything from two pages in length but should contain the following information:
• Reason for the audit
• Criterion or criteria to be measured
• Standard(s) set
• Description of the preparation and planning
• Results of the initial data collection
• Description of change(s) implemented
• Results of the data collection post-changes
• Conclusions.

Keeping your audit projects relevant to your practice, short, simple and easily manageable is the key to success. Choosing a topic is the first step and there should be agreement within the practice that the chosen topic for audit is a worthwhile area to study.

Ethical considerations
Clinical audits usually involve looking at information already collected about a patient or treatment and does not usually involve gathering new information. In addition, the data is mainly gathered for internal (practice) consumption in one practice. Hence, audit does not usually require ethical approval. However, if you intend to gather new data, to interview/test patients, to include more than one practice or to publish, you will need to obtain ethical approval.

Data protection considerations
Clinical audit usually has the potential to be of direct benefit to patients. Where all access to patient-identifiable data for internal audit is by GPs or practices on their own practice population, implied consent is acceptable. However, it is important to inform patients that the practice may use data for internal audit, with an option for them to opt out of this use of their data. This can be included in a patient information leaflet or privacy statement. It is not acceptable for external research staff to trawl through individual patient records without informed patient consent. It is also not acceptable to release the contact details of patients to researchers without informed patient consent.

The facility to record your audit activity is contained within your professional competence ePortfolio on www.icgp.ie. This asks you to record the audit title, start date, end date and a brief description. You can also upload a supporting document, for example, the report. Uploading a supporting document is optional but will facilitate review and validation, should you be selected for same.

For elaboration on the steps above, audit examples/suggestions, audit template documents and answers to frequently asked questions, see the ICGP audit toolkit on www.icgp.ie/PC. For any audit queries not answered in the audit toolkit, please email your question to professional-competence@icgp.ie.

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