

# Work-based assessments through the eyes of a core surgical trainee

The main method by which core surgical trainees receive feedback and ongoing assessment in their training is through the completion of work-based assessments. Work-based assessments have become part of medical specialty training curricula across the UK, alongside traditional examinations, as they can be used to monitor trainee performance on the job and ensure attainment of competencies necessary for independent practice.

Although implementation and use of work-based assessments has been widely supported by both medical educators (Wilkinson et al, 2008) and professional regulatory bodies (General Medical Council and Academy of Medical Royal Colleges, 2010), there still appears to be limited evidence to support work-based assessments as an educational initiative (Miller and Archer, 2010) and to shift trainees' perception of the work-based assessment as a 'tick box exercise' (Bindal et al, 2011). The focus should be steered away from work-based assessments being viewed as opportunistic educational vehicles and onto integrating such assessment programmes into medical curricula (van Der Vleuten and Schuwirth, 2005).

To become a consultant in a particular surgical specialty in the UK, all surgical trainees must subscribe to the Intercollegiate Surgical Curriculum Programme, the national online curriculum for surgical training in the UK. For core surgical trainees, a fixed set of curricular requirements is normally specified in a 'global objectives' statement produced by the training programme director. This includes deadlines for completion of membership examinations and minimum numbers of work-based assessments to be completed in order to ensure training

progression. Various work-based assessment types are available to help trainees pick up on valuable learning events in different training settings. Providing this variety of assessment methods ensures adequate coverage of topics and attainment of skills required for the next level of training (Rust, 2004).

### Types of work-based assessments

There are five main types of work-based assessment to be completed by core surgical trainees, each with their own utility. They are the multi-source feedback, clinical evaluation exercise, directly observed procedural skill, procedure-based assessment and case-based discussion. The multi-source feedback is a useful collegial assessment tool as it is meant to provide multidisciplinary views of an individual trainee's performance for comparison with the trainee's self-assessment. The clinical evaluation exercise is a method of assessing skills (e.g. communication, diagnostic, management, professional) required for delivering good clinical care and can usually be contextualized to a surgical environment.

The directly observed procedural skill is similar to the clinical evaluation exercise with the difference being that it is procedure-focused. The procedure-based assessment is a more in-depth version of the directly observed procedural skill normally expected of more senior trainees as it is meant to pick up on the subtleties desired of a competent operator. Finally, the case-based discussion is meant to help develop clinical decision making and explore the application of medical knowledge to clinical practice, attributes expected of all trainees.

### Advantages

At face value, it would seem that there is a particular work-based assessment type for the majority of potential core surgical learning events. Work-based assessments explore all areas in Miller's pyramid (Miller, 1990) and share similar assessment criteria, meaning that they can overcome variation among those being assessed and those assessing. By being

trainee-driven, work-based assessments can provide structured guidance to trainers and create an ethos where giving feedback becomes commonplace. In a system where there is the potential for trainees to have limited contact with their allocated clinical supervisor, work-based assessments can help identify those struggling and highlight areas for improvement by providing multiple senior inputs.

### Disadvantages

To understand the influence of work-based assessment feedback on the learning process, emphasis must be placed on content, delivery and incorporation into trainees' learning (Pelgrim et al, 2012). Experience suggests that not all trainees who have work-based assessments completed by their trainers receive feedback and a major reason for this can be a lack of initiative on behalf of the trainer. Trainees may often decide upon their own work-based assessment content during supervisor feedback sessions because that has been their previous experience with other trainers. While this may potentially demonstrate initiative and a desire to reflect upon individual performance, it may also allow some trainees to focus on areas in which they feel strongest.

### Trainees' use of work-based assessments

Trainees may be less likely to use work-based assessments to address weaker areas and this is probably because they fear the idea of having the earlier stages of their training assessed and committed to written record for external assessors to review and critique. The only time trainees feel comfortable with allowing trainers to decide their work-based assessment content is when enough time is given for them to prepare for their assessment. While many may view this as less work based and more simulated, it cements engagement with the learning event. The intended purpose of work-based assessments should be to exhibit gradual improvements in the areas being assessed, thus demonstrating an ability to learn and be trained.

**Mr Theodore Pezas** is Core Surgical Trainee in Plastic Surgery, Oxford University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, John Radcliffe Hospital, Headington, Oxford OX3 9DU ([theodorepezas@doctors.org.uk](mailto:theodorepezas@doctors.org.uk))

Not all trainees may view work-based assessments in this way. Some less motivated students may avoid doing more than the required number of work-based assessments and hence miss out on the additional learning potential hidden in the work-based assessments they never complete. Removing the perceived stigma associated with work-based assessments revealing 'development required' feedback would be a firm step in the right direction.

## Making the most of work-based assessments

Work-based assessments should be viewed as motivational triggers for improvement, but they are more commonly thought to provide points for critique by members of an annual review of competence progression panel. By creating an atmosphere of opportunism for each trainee where the terms 'outstanding', 'satisfactory' and 'development required' are broken down into more specific detail to allow active reflection, trainers could make these summative feedback tools more constructively aligned with both the core surgical training curriculum and the more formative aspects of trainee assessment. This would allow trainees to use work-based assessments to attain the learning expected from the curriculum and ultimately ensure preparedness of the trainee for his/her respective annual review of competence progression.

Another key to changing trainees' perspectives of work-based assessment feedback lies in good mentorship. Giving trainees the sense that they are believed in and, even more than that, that their trainer cares about what happens to them beyond the scope of just 'signing off' their progression establishes rapport and creates an atmosphere where trainees feel safe to

expose their weaker areas. Fortunately, several inspirational trainers have reinforced these beliefs during the author's training thus far but not everyone is so lucky. It is likely that many trainees feel unable to focus work-based assessments on their weaker areas in the presence of a trainer who serves as their consultant, clinical or educational supervisor. Perhaps the addition of formal trainer responsibility for trainee progression prevents the sort of rapport which allows a comfortable trainer–trainee atmosphere. The best way for one to test this theory would be by taking on such formal responsibilities as a supervisor in their own right.

## Conclusions

Clearly the purpose of work-based assessments, like other forms of assessment, should be to support learning (Gibbs and Simpson, 2004). Work-based assessment feedback should facilitate topic discussions and promote deep learning (Branch and Paranjape, 2002). The introduction of trainer workshops to help develop this process of facilitation would improve work-based assessment integration into the core surgical training curriculum as this is and will always be most significantly influenced by the level of enthusiasm emanating from those signing them off. **BJHM**

*Conflict of interest: none.*

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## KEY POINTS

- Work-based assessments are a form of summative feedback and assessment used by core surgical training programmes to monitor trainee progression.
- They have the ability to potentially overcome assessor and assessee variation.
- Trainees may use work-based assessments to focus on their strongest areas.
- Good mentorship and facilitated trainer workshops may improve integration of work-based assessments into the core surgical training curriculum.

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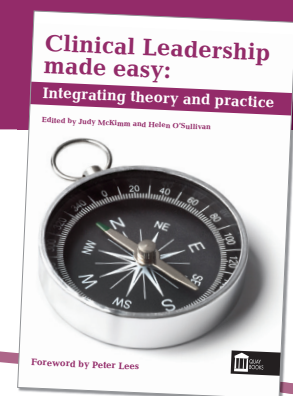
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