Human nature drives individuals to be concerned with what others think. Students value instructor feedback, and nursing staff value administrative feedback. Although feedback from these individuals is appreciated, there is a role for peer feedback in both educational and practice settings. Peer review provides a type of performance feedback and the opportunity for nursing staff and students to gain professional skills. Peer review is a time-efficient way to improve practice and provide a mechanism for ongoing quality improvement. Benefits of peer review include promoting learning and appraisal skills (Falchivkov & Goldfinch, 2000), enhancing student responsibility (Sluijsmans, Dochy, & Moerkerke, 1998), and helping nurses to become reflective practitioners.

The purpose of this article is to describe the process of peer review, to discuss the benefits of peer review, and to consider implications in both nursing education and professional practice. To gain the best evidence on peer review practices, a systematic review of the literature included a thorough search strategy using the terms peer review and peer assessment in CINAHL, PubMed, and Web Search. Because few research studies were found, theory-based articles and anecdotal resources including nursing textbooks were also considered. A total of 25 resources with references from 1998 to present were considered appropriate.

BACKGROUND
The use of peer review provides nurses the opportunity to gain skills for professional practice. Peer review, increasing in almost all disciplines including nursing, medicine, and education, is found to promote learning and appraisal (Falchivkov & Goldfinch, 2000), two skills that are valuable in the clinical setting. Enhancing student responsibility for learning also increases through the process of peer review (Sluijsmans et al., 1998). Professional and personal development occurs as a result of using the feedback obtained through peer review.

Peer Review and Peer Assessment Concepts
A peer is defined as one who is of equal standing with another, especially one belonging to the same societal group based on age, grade, or status (Merriam-Webster, 2007). In the professional setting, a peer can be a colleague in a similar position in nursing. In nursing education, a peer is considered another student at a similar level in a nursing program. Peers are individuals on the same level who are able to translate complex information learned in the classroom into a
form that is more relevant, applicable, and understandable (Belland et al., 2006).

The terms peer assessment and peer review are used interchangeably throughout the literature. Peer assessment is a process of collecting, interpreting, and communicating evaluative information to a peer while creating a comfortable environment for this exchange; power levels between the evaluator and the person being evaluated are eliminated (Fenwick & Parsons, 1999). Peer review is an interactive process that helps nursing staff and students provide feedback to peers based on specific criteria to assist in the professional and/or personal growth and development of the peer or colleague (Juwah, 2003). Peer review has been described as the review of another colleague’s practice by others in the same profession (Lexico Publishing Group, 2007). Peer review is a systematic process used in nursing where practicing professional nurses evaluate their colleague’s practice to ensure that standards of practice are being followed (Registered Nurse Association of Ontario, n.d.).

Peer review has been considered a process where students evaluate the coursework of their peers, including the quality, level, value, and success of products (Topping, 1998). The peer review process can focus on the learning benefits of small group work and the development of valuable skills in nursing such as critical assessment skills (Pond, 1995). Peer review is used in small group work and the development of valuable skills in nursing such as critical assessment skills (Pond, 1995). Peer review used in small work groups provides an opportunity for active learning through reflective discussions and participation in this exchange (Hart et al., 2000).

Throughout the literature, peer review and peer assessment are both viewed as purposeful processes that provide for the opportunity for feedback between peers to occur. The definition of peer review used by the authors is that peer review is an organized, systematic process whereby peers can evaluate the professional practice of another colleague using a standardized tool with the goal of providing constructive feedback to promote professional growth and development.

PEER REVIEW AS A PROCESS

Peer review, whether formal or informal, can influence learning in both nursing education and professional practice. As staff and faculty work with nursing students and new graduate nurses in the clinical setting, increasing constructive feedback and demonstrating professionalism are important to develop nurses prepared to practice in the complex healthcare environment. Peer review serves as one tool for extending these opportunities.

Peer Review as an Informal Process

Peer review can be an informal process. When working on projects or papers in nursing education, for example, students often solicit advice from other students in a course. Students from previous semesters’ courses are sometimes viewed as subject experts, and current students may seek these individuals as reviewers to gain from the full circle of feedback that they have already received from both their peers and course faculty. When faced with complex clinical situations, staff nurses often seek feedback and guidance from peers. This informal use of peer review provides nursing students and staff nurses with information that benefits learning. Learning also occurs during the interaction with peers and through the opportunity to critique coursework and/or practice situations (Cobb, Billings, Mays, & Canty-Mitchell, 2001).

Peer Review as a Formal Process

As a formal process, peer review can be used for staff nurses to evaluate their peers in the clinical setting with the use of standardized tool. At an academic medical center, for example, staff nurses are required to complete peer review on three staff members once a quarter. The feedback gained from the tools is then used by the unit manager when developing the staff member’s evaluation. The manager can also share with the staff educator any learning or developmental needs that the staff may have based on the feedback received from the review. The staff educator can then develop an action plan based on the data from the review to meet the staff member’s learning needs. By having staff assigned to complete specific reviews, the manager is able to track compliance with unit requirements.

Benefits of the tool are that it provides performance data in areas that the manager may not be able to observe on a regular basis. The peer review process gives staff the opportunity to evaluate peers in a consistent, objective, and organized way. Challenges with this tool are that staff believe that they are less able to assess the patient care questions because they do not frequently observe the peer’s care processes. Evaluating interpersonal skills including teamwork is an area that staff are able to observe and objectively give feedback (see Table 1 and Figure 1).

Benefits of Peer Review

Peer review benefits include gaining critical appraisal skills and becoming reflective practitioners, vital skills for the settings in which professional nurses practice (Sluijsmans et al., 1998). Peer review assists in the identification of opportunities to improve care as individuals
Peer review benefits for both faculty and students include increased frequency and timeliness of feedback and enhanced learning through interaction and evaluation (Belland et al., 2006). Fenwick and Parsons (1999) found that the process of peer review developed students’ ability to observe and appraise their own and other’s thoughts and actions, increased students’ awareness of their personal biases and how they respond to others, enhanced their ability to be objective rather than subjective based on standards and criteria, and developed the important ability of providing and accepting constructive feedback. Juwah (2003) found that peer review in online courses enhanced critical-thinking skills and improved problem-solving skills and the ability to reflect. Peer review provides the opportunity to provide constructive feedback in a nonthreatening environment (Fenwick & Parsons, 1999; Juwah, 2003).

Other benefits of peer assessment include inspiring and empowering students in the active learning process, giving students the opportunity for ownership and involvement in the class, and promoting open sharing of ideas (Sluijsmans et al., 1998). In a study regarding faculty practices in providing online course feedback, Bonnel, Ludwig, and Smith (2007) found that peer review is a form of feedback that allows students to “norm” themselves against the group through group projects, discussion board assignments, and review of a classmate’s paper. Students learn tasks better themselves as they watch how others perform against criteria. This provides the opportunity to review their projects and improve them as well.

Benefits of peer review for the staff nurse include the promotion of learning through the process of reflecting about and learning from mistakes, improving critical appraisal skills, reducing risk, and improving the ability to provide constructive feedback as well as holding peers accountable for quality. Gaining peer review skills in the professional setting provides

### TABLE 1 Case Example

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student learning example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In an online RN-to-BSN program, students take an elective course called Patient Education for Diverse Populations. As part of this course, they develop a teaching plan. In addition to self-reflection on specific criteria for successful implementation, student partners complete a peer critique. On the basis of the peer critique, students make appropriate changes to the teaching plan before submitting it for a grade.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Staff development example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Peer review is used by staff nurses to evaluate their peers in the clinical setting using a standardized tool (see Figure 1). When completing the peer review tool, nurses are expected to provide objective and constructive feedback to help in the professional growth and development process of the colleague. Nurses are gaining experience with professionalism and accountability through the process of peer review and contributing to the quality of care provided on the unit. Although formal training is not provided to the staff on the use of the tool, well-defined instructions on the tool that the staff can reference are available. Staff have the right to not complete a specific review if they have not worked directly with the staff member they are assigned to review.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note.** BSN = bachelor of science in nursing.
FIGURE 1 Sample peer review tool. The Peer Evaluation Tool was based on the performance standards of the organization of service, people, quality, cost, and growth. Staff nurses receive the Peer Evaluation Tool on a quarterly basis from the administrative assistant. A confidential envelope is placed with the reviews. The nursing staff are assigned three members to review on the basis of a rotating chart developed by the nurse manager. The administrative assistant documents compliance with the completion of audits. After tracking, the audit tools are filed in the file of the individual who was reviewed and are used to provide feedback on the annual performance evaluation.
10. Looks for performance improvement opportunities and works towards solutions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Not observed</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

11. Please give an example of how this employee demonstrates quality care:

**COST:**

12. Utilizes available resources efficiently and effectively while providing patient care.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Not observed</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

13. Please give an example of how this employee effectively uses resources:

**GROWTH:**

14. Seeks out and participates in learning opportunities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Not observed</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

15. Functions effectively as a preceptor or mentor to other nursing staff.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Not observed</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

16. Please provide an example of how this employee approaches learning opportunities:

**OPEN ENDED QUESTIONS:**

17. List three strengths of this employee:

1. 
2. 
3. 

18. Name at least two things this employee could do differently in providing patient care:

1. 
2. 

19. General Comments:

---

The Management Council of The University of Kansas Hospital

FIGURE 1 (Continued)
staff nurses with experience that can be used in the future for peer review of publications, grants, and other activities.

CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES FOR PEER REVIEW

Reliability of Peer Review

Although many benefits exist for peer review in nursing education and professional practice, challenges are also present. The reliability and validity of peer review have been debated in the literature. In an analysis of 62 studies evaluating self-assessment, peer assessment, and coassessment, Sluijsmans et al. (1998) found that a combination of self-assessment, peer assessment, and coassessment increased the reliability and validity of assessments. Topping’s (1998) review of the literature found support for peer assessment as a reliable tool and as having many benefits such as increased confidence and improved teamwork. In a meta-analysis of 48 quantitative studies, Falchikov and Goldfinch (2000) found that validity was increased by explicit criteria for peer review. Nurses in staff education in collaboration with staff nurses can help develop comprehensive, well-designed tools and provide training to enhance the reliability and validity of peer review.

Anxiety in Peer Review

Students may have anxiety regarding giving and receiving feedback. Potential for gaining negative feedback or receiving recommendations for change often produces the most anxiety (Belland et al., 2006). Fenwick and Parsons (1999) identified that challenges of peer review included difficulty in accepting feedback as an opportunity for growth rather than a personal attack. Peers may feel embarrassed or concerned that as a reviewer, they may sound overly critical and judgmental when providing honest feedback. Balancing power was also a challenge of peer review (Fenwick & Parsons, 1999; Topping, 1998). In an article describing peer evaluation of graduate competencies, students were hesitant to provide negative feedback (Chaves, Baker, Chaves, & Fisher, 2006). Students were concerned with the effect that their feedback could have on another student’s grade and the potential for creating disharmony in the classroom. This occurred even though some of the students were nurse managers who were required and responsible for providing constructive feedback as part of their role in performance evaluations (Chaves et al., 2006).

To help avoid anxiety and negative connotation related to the review process, peer review might best be considered more formative than summative evaluation, providing student/staff opportunity for growth. Showing peer review in positive connotations such as building peer review opportunities into staff orientations and student course orientations is an example. This includes teaching/learning how to both use and give peer feedback. Students and staff benefit as they learn while completing peer feedback against a criteria (Bonnel et al., 2007). A user-friendly and thorough educational component is needed to counter some of the concerns specific to peer review.

IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATION AND HEALTH CARE

Peer review is important to healthcare organizations for multiple reasons, including quality improvement for both individuals and the organization. Through the process of systematic practice review, individuals gain the feedback necessary to improve practice. Care processes needing improvement are identified, making way for quality initiatives. Peer review completed on a routine basis enables the individual and organization to evaluate the effectiveness of initiatives implemented for quality improvement.

Having peer review processes in place is one way for organizations to promote and document the Magnet force of autonomy. Agencies seeking Magnet status, for example, want to demonstrate increased professionalism and accountability (American Nurses Credentialing Center [ANCC], 2007; George et al., 2002; Pastorius, 2007). Descriptors of nurse autonomy include assessing and providing nursing actions as appropriate for patient care based on competence, professional expertise, and knowledge (ANCC, 2007). Peer review processes are one of the standards needed to meet this force. By developing new tools that encourage professional behaviors, these agencies are providing staff with the opportunity to evaluate and learn how to use the tools.

Education and training in specific peer review tools is needed. Structure and process for providing and gaining peer review need to be clearly identified. This includes a clearly identified purpose, well-designed tools such as rubrics for completing the review, and a process for completing and sharing the assessment. Project-specific criteria are needed, as well as broad guidelines. Specific criteria help students and practitioners learn or recall what successful practice looks like (Fink, 2003). Rubrics can be beneficial in guiding peer evaluation.

A specific feedback process should be identified, including whether feedback is to be given verbally or written as well as who should have access to the information. Even issues as to whether or not
peer review should be included in evaluations should be considered. In an article about peer coaching, Waddell and Dunn (2005) indicate that because feedback provided through coaching is not mandatory, it should not be part of the performance evaluation. Peer review that provides information based on specific criteria may be used for evaluations depending on unit policies. Specific guidelines, criteria, and rubrics help organize the process as well as help peers learn as they critique.

Staff educators have many opportunities to help nursing staff understand the process of peer review. Peer review tools can be considered a type of teaching tool (Stevens & Levi, 2005). Educators can coach nurses through informal meetings or teach nurses in workshops or class sessions about the use of peer review in the clinical setting. To make peer review relevant to the bedside nurse, educators can explain the benefits using case studies and role modeling the process. For nurses to use peer review, it must be an efficient process and not take valuable time away from patient care. The organization’s e-learning system might be used to offer additional self-directed education regarding peer review to reinforce content taught by staff educators.

Further study of challenges and outcomes in both student and staff nurse peer review is needed, as well as research on best practices for peer review. Sample questions might include the following: Are all student and staff levels appropriate candidates for giving peer review when given the appropriate task? Are some students better suited for peer evaluation? What are appropriate considerations for matching peers? Are there best times to do peer review? What are best practices in learning peer review? What are best strategies to introduce students and staff to peer review? More work is needed in this area.

**SUMMARY**

Nursing students and staff nurses benefit by developing competency in the process of peer review. Peer review provides an avenue for nursing students to practice critical appraisal skills and objective evaluation in the classroom setting that will then be useful in their professional practice when they become staff nurses. These skills also provide staff nurses with the opportunity to grow professionally and demonstrate autonomy. Continuous performance feedback overall is an important practice in promoting safe, quality care. Peer review may make this practice more time efficient and add the benefit of gaining professional skills for other projects as well. Specific guidelines, criteria, and rubrics help organize the process and help peers learn as they critique.

**REFERENCES**


Brady, D., Corbie-Smith, G., & Branch, W. (2002). What’s important to you? The use of narratives to promote self-reflection and to understand the experiences of medical residents. *Annals of Internal Medicine, 137*(3), 220–223.


**ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE:** Heidi Boehm, MSN, RN, Family Medicine and Orthopedics, The University of Kansas Hospital, Mail Stop 2018, Unit 43, 3901 Rainbow Blvd., Kansas City, KS 66160 [e-mail: hboehm@kumc.edu].

---

**Erratum**

In the last NNSDO Update, we inadvertently stated that the Nursing Professional Development Certification Exam would be held at the 2010 NNSDO convention. The exam will not be held at the convention this year. For more information about the exam go to the ANCC Web site at www.nursecredentialing.org or call ANCC at 800.284.2378. This error has been noted in the online version of the article, which is available at www.jnsonline.com.

**REFERENCE**


---

Copyright © 2010 Lippincott Williams & Wilkins. Unauthorized reproduction of this article is prohibited.