A TOOLKIT FOR LEARNING NEEDS ASSESSMENT FOR DENTAL PRACTITIONERS

Reflecting on personal learning needs and identifying strengths and weaknesses in practice can help dental practitioners in selecting CPD activities that match their learning needs. It is important that the selection of CPD activities is based on the learning needs of the dental practitioner. This document sets out a learning needs assessment tool which can help dental practitioners to identify and select CPD activities which best address their learning needs. The process of learning needs identification is integration to personal development planning and many appraisal systems.

The aim of this document is to enable dental practitioners to:

- Identify their strengths in practice

- Identify areas where they need to improvement in practice

- Prioritise and plan to meet their educational needs

Identifying strengths and weaknesses in practice

The following prompts can be used to help dental practitioners consider areas of strength and weakness within their practice:

- Which areas are you are most proud of, that best reflect your skills?

- Which areas do you find most difficult or frustrating?

- What have your achievements been?

- Where do you have any concerns?

- What do you need to change in your practice?

- What were the outcomes of any audits that have been carried out in your practice?

- What feedback have you had from colleagues and patients?

- Are you up to date with core compulsory and core recommended topics?

Areas identified as weaknesses in practice can be addressed as learning needs.

Prioritising learning needs

Once a practitioner's learning needs have been identified, the next stage is to decide which learning needs to address and in what order. Personal needs and the needs of the practice will influence how learning needs are prioritised, as well time and resource limitations, and local and national guidelines. Rughani (2003) recommends that learning needs which concern safety and basic competency should be addressed first, followed by those set by governmental or regulatory bodies. A time frame should be set for addressing the learning needs identified through this process.

Identifying relevant CPD activities to address learning needs

Once specific areas of learning need have been identified and prioritised, the next step is to select the highest priority area and decide how an improvement in that area can be achieved. The following points could be considered:

- Where do you access postgraduate education?

- What professional associations or societies are you a member of?

- What journals do you subscribe to?

- What e-learning is available to you?

- Are there any common or special interest groups in your locality that are relevant to you?

- What other providers of CPD are accessible to you, and how can you find out what programmes they run?

- How much time can you allocate to CPD activities?

- If CPD is mandatory in your country of practice, how many hours/credits do you need to do this year?

- What would be the benefits of addressing your learning needs in this area?

This process can be repeated for other identified areas of learning need.

Table 1 can be used to track learning needs, their priority, and how they will be addressed.

Table 1. A template which can be used to identify and prioritise learning needs, and actions that can be taken to address these needs.

Learning need	Why was this need identified?	Priority	Activities that could be used to address this learning need
To improve skills in the management of tooth surface loss.	An increasing proportion of elderly patients attending the practice. Difficulty managing severe cases.	Intermediate	Attend management of surface loss and worn dentition recognised CPD course provided by a recognised CPD provider.

Evaluating how learning needs have been addressed

The learning needs assessment is completed by keeping a record of the education activities that have been undertaken and evaluating what effect they have had on personal development and practice. Each CPD activity can be documented to keep a record of learning needs addressed. Table 2 gives an example of how this information can be recorded:

Table 2. A template for recording action taken to address learning needs, and the impact of this action on practice.

Summary of CPD activity	Learning needs addressed	Relevance to practice	Actions to take as a result of CPD activity
Management of surface loss and worn dentition CPD course – 1 day	To improve skills in the management of tooth surface loss.	Gained skills to identify at risk patients and deal with severe cases.	Developed protocols for the identification and management of tooth surface loss. Identified strategies for managing severe cases.

Having undertaken a learning needs assessment and addressed several learning needs, the process can be evaluated by considering the following points:

- Which learning needs were the easiest to address, and why
- Which learning needs were the most difficult to address, and why
- Which CPD activities were the most valuable, and why
- Which CPD activities were the least valuable, and why
- How has this learning been applied to practice
- What have been the benefits to dental practice and patients as a result addressing learning needs
- Which learning needs still need to be addressed

The outcomes of this evaluation can be used by the practitioner in undertaking their next learning needs assessment.

Reference
Rughani A. The GP's guide to personal development plans. 2 nd ed., Radcliffe Publishing, 2001.

Useful websites

http://www.rcseng.ac.uk/fds/nacpde/overseas_qualified/personaldevelopmentplan.html

(Includes a personal development plan form)

http://www.dentaljuce.com/fruit/page.asp?pid=284

(Provides an online learning needs review for dentists – UK specific)

http://www.oxforddeanery.nhs.uk/courses__conferences_centre.aspx

http://www.bristol.ac.uk/dentalpg/education/pdp