Assessing the prescribing skills of tomorrow’s doctors

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Prescribing is a complex and challenging task that requires diagnostic skills, knowledge of medicines, communication skills, an understanding of the principles of clinical pharmacology, appreciation of risk and uncertainty, and ideally experience. It is an anomaly that recent medical graduates are often the doctors who prescribe most frequently in modern hospitals. The demands on new prescribers have increased because of several important trends including more licensed medicines available, more indications for drug therapy, greater complexity of treatment regimens leading to ‘polypharmacy’, and more elderly and vulnerable patients. The systems that prescribers work in are often complex and contribute to suboptimal performance. Medication errors and avoidable adverse reactions are common causes of harm to patients and many involve recently qualified doctors. For all of these reasons, there is great interest in ensuring that medical graduates are competent to prescribe and supervise the use of medicines within the health service. This talk will focus on the development of the Prescribing Skills Assessment (PSA) which is designed to assess prescribing-related skills amongst final year medical students. This session will cover (i) the content of the PSA, (ii) the development and quality control of the PSA item bank, (iii) the novel PSA online system used to author and edit items, and deliver assessments to medical schools, and (iv) the experience gained from the PSA piloting undertaken in 2012 and 2013 amongst 5,000 medical graduates.

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