

RHRC CONSORTIUM MONITORING AND EVALUATION TOOLKIT

OBSERVATION PROTOCOL

Purpose Observation is used to directly examine the content and manner of interactions between service providers and clients, in order to make the services better.

Description

Observation requires that a supervisor (or researcher) watch a health service provider carry out his or her work, such as health education sessions, clinical services or counseling. The supervisor uses a guide to assess the interaction for accuracy of content and the manner in which the provider treats the client. The results should be fed back to the provider so she/he can improve her/his practice.

Ethical Considerations

Approvals

When observation is planned as part of supervision, permission must be obtained from the health system authorities, and the health care providers must be informed. If the observation is part of a study, additional approvals may be required.

Informed Consent

Every client has the right to refuse to allow the observer to be present during her interaction with the provider. The observer must respect this right.

Privacy

The client's right to privacy exists whether or not an observer is present at a session between a client and provider. It is important that the atmosphere in the session be comfortable for both client and provider.

Confidentiality

The observer may not discuss anything from the interaction with anyone, except the supervisor when clarification is needed. In the observer's notes, no client or provider should be identified by name.

Data Collection Guide

The instrument for observation is a guide or checklist for use by the trained observer, who may be a supervisor or a researcher. The guide contains a list of elements to be observed and assessed during each client-provider interaction, such as whether the provider greeted the client and made her feel comfortable, gave her correct information, used correct medical procedures, provided an opportunity for the client to ask questions, and other steps in the process of providing health care.

The guide might require the observer to check 'Yes' or 'No' on each item; give a number score (e.g., rate each element on a scale of 1 to 5); and/or provide a space to write notes on her observations. Many guides are a combination of Yes/No or numerical ratings and notes.

[Click here](#) for an example of an observation guide on provision of antenatal care.

[Click here](#) for an example of an observation guide on provision of family planning services.

Sampling Plan

When observation is carried out as part of supervision, the manager usually ensures that all providers are observed and assisted at least once or twice per year. Sites or workers with particular problems can be observed and assisted more frequently.

When observation is used as part of a study to assess the overall care provided at one point in time, all providers should be observed if possible. If that is not feasible, random sampling can be used. First, a random sample of service delivery sites should be drawn. Then, if it is not possible to observe all providers in each selected site, a random sample of providers in each site should be drawn.

Data Collection Procedures

During observation, the observer is introduced to the client by the provider and the client is asked if the observer may sit in on the session. If the client agrees, the observer sits apart from the client and provider and does not participate in their session. The observer notes her observations on the guide as the session goes on.

Observer Characteristics

An effective observer has the same characteristics as a good supervisor.

Like a supervisor, an observer should have:

- education at least equal to the workers being observed,
- sex and age that is comfortable for the workers and clients,
- good language and communication skills,
- familiarity and comfort with reproductive health topics,
- ability to respect the dignity of respondents and confidentiality required by the observation,
- previous experience with supervision, if possible.

Observer Training

Observers should receive 1-3 days of training conducted by the upper level managers or study coordinators, who themselves must be trained and/or oriented to the study. The training should emphasize practice with the observation guide or checklist so that all the observers understand it in the same way. During training, each observer should complete at least three practice observations and have the opportunity to discuss these experiences with the facilitators and others being trained.

It is ideal if the observers are involved in pre-testing the instruments. This gives them good experience and increases their confidence level.

Time Frame

Observers can spend ½ to 1 day at each site to observe several client-provider interactions and discuss their notes with the workers.

Analysis Plan

The Yes/No or numerical ratings on the checklists may be added for each site, and summarized along with the observers' notes. If observations are taken regularly as part of supervision, the supervisor can track changes in each site and/or provider over time.

It is also useful for the program manager to summarize the observation results from all the sites, to understand how well standards are being met in the program overall.

Use of Data

When observation is used as a routine element of supervision, the observer can provide immediate feedback to providers to reinforce good quality services, correct errors (in information provided or technical procedures, for example) and help providers respectfully serve their clients.

The information collected through observation can be used to monitor changes in a particular site or to monitor how care is being provided in all of the sites in a geographic or program area. Communities may also be interested in the feedback from supervisors to their health facility or community workers.

Dissemination

Results from observations may be reported in regular monthly or quarterly reports. If observation results show that performance has improved substantially, it would be useful for the program to share its experience with other programs through presenting at meetings, writing a brief report for its organization's newsletter or publishing journal articles.

Additional Resources