ACTIONCARDS – one-page instructions framing POCUS use for family medicine physicians

Point-of-care ultrasound (POCUS) is widely used in many clinical specialties including family medicine [1]. The potential use in family medicine includes a great variety of clinical situations and related scanning modalities [2, 3]. However, for many scanning projections the frequency with which the scan is performed is low [4–6] making it difficult to develop routine and maintain scanning competence. Furthermore, the low pre-test probability of disease and less severe cases seen in patients in primary care may challenge the ability to recognize pathology on images. In addition, the working conditions in office-based family medicine leave little room for practice due to the timeframe of the consultation [7] and the lack of opportunities for collegial back-and-forth discussion and proctored scans.

There is no evidence or consensus as to how general practitioners (GPs) are best trained [8]. In Denmark, a group of researchers at Center for General Practice at Aalborg University and GPs organized in the Danish Society for Ultrasound in General Practice (DAUS) have developed a longitudinal basic POCUS training course, accounting for the specific learning challenges in office-based family practice. This basic ultrasound course was developed based on previous studies exploring the educational needs of GPs [5, 8–10].

The learning steps from novice to expert in relation to skills development have been explored extensively in health care research [11]. Educational research has described a need for structure and scaffolding in the beginning of a learning process to provide a safe environment for developing skills [12, 13]. To provide scaffolding, guidance and support during the learning, action cards were developed framing POCUS examinations to general practice. For a specific POCUS application the action cards state: (1) in which clinical situations the POCUS examination can be used, (2) which transducer and pre-set is recommended, (3) how the POCUS examination is performed, (4) How POCUS findings should be interpreted, (5) common pathological findings, (6) possible errors and common mistakes, and (7) how to integrate findings in a clinical context (Fig. 1).

The action cards were evaluated in a master thesis [14]. Eight GPs were interviewed about the use of action cards as a support tool when scanning in their general practice. Overall, they found them very useful in facilitating the use of POCUS. The action cards offered the opportunity to prepare for a scan or brush-up, provided guidance and corrections in case-of-doubt, and facilitated the completion of examinations as well as increased participants’ confidence in the results.

By framing relevant POCUS examination to the general practice setting, action cards may create a uniform understanding of POCUS use in primary care and thereby give the encoded and embedded knowledge that the healthcare system needs for a successful implementation of POCUS in primary care [9].

The actioncards are freely available in Danish on the Danish Doctors Handbook at https://www.sundhed.dk/sundhedsfaglig/laegehaandbogen/sundhedsoplysning/sundhedsoplysning/ultralyd-i-almen-praksis/. They have been developed by GPs and reviewed by a relevant specialists prior to the final evaluation process and publication in the Doctors Handbook. For ultrasound courses, the actioncards are supplemented with small instructive videos following the same structure.

Using action cards for POCUS training of GPs supports the GPs scanning technique and increases transparency about what and how GPs perform POCUS scans. We cordially invite others, who may be interested, to adapt the idea and we will be happy to assist in translations.

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