WHAT IS IT?
Clinical audit is a clinically led initiative to improve the outcomes of patient care via structured review – clinicians examine their practice and results against agreed standards and modify their practice where indicated (Mann, 1996).

1. IDENTIFY A TOPIC
The first step is to select a topic that is important or significant and interests those conducting the audit.
Check that others who will be involved in the audit agree with your proposals. Implementing change will be difficult if they disagree.
Check that no one else in your work environment is conducting the same audit.

2. SET CRITERIA/STANDARDS
A criterion is an item of care or an aspect of practice that can be used to assess quality.
An audit criterion is a statement of what should be happening. For example, ‘the medical records show that patients with diabetes are reviewed every six months.’
Ensure that the criterion is measurable.

3. DATA COLLECTION
After setting the criteria/standards for the audit, collect the audit data.
Data can be collected from questionnaires, computer and paper records, and data collection sheets.
Electronic data is preferable as it is likely to be quicker and more accurate. However, electronic audit tools should be checked thoroughly because problems can still emerge.

4. COMPARE RESULTS WITH CRITERIA AND STANDARDS
After collection, analyse the data. In most instances, the analysis involves calculating percentages to determine whether the standard has been achieved.
Audit data should also be analysed to identify particular trends/problems.

5. IMPLEMENTING CHANGE
This stage of the audit cycle is one of the most crucial and often one of the most difficult.
After analysing the data, the audit team need to decide what changes should be implemented.
Whatever changes result from an audit, it is vital that the change process is not left to chance. A detailed action plan should be made stating exactly who, when, what and how changes are to be implemented.

6. RE-AUDIT
The final phase of the audit cycle is to undertake a re-audit to ensure that any remedial action undertaken in response to the first audit has been effective.

REFERENCE
London: Department of Health.

WEBSITES
National Institute for Clinical Excellence:
www.nice.org.uk
Audit Commission:
www.audit-commission.gov.uk
Clinical Governance Support Team:
www.cgsupport.org

The information given serves as a general reference. Nurses should consult their individual trust policies on clinical procedures.