

Nurse Practitioners

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A nurse practitioner is a nurse with a graduate degree in advanced practice nursing. The development of the nurse practitioner's role varies between, and even within, countries and health care systems, in terms of education, purpose, type, acuity, and sponsorship. For example, the education of nurse practitioners ranges from continued professional education courses, to a bachelor of science, to a curriculum specific to nurse practitioners at the level of a master of science in nursing. The practice sites of nurse practitioners include hospitals, communities, ambulatory settings, mobile clinics, work sites, and schools. The domains of their clinical activity vary between conditions (e.g., cardiology, diabetes, oncology), client groups (e.g., acutely ill, children, elderly, homeless), areas/specialties (e.g., intensive care, emergency care, neonatal unit), and health settings (e.g., hospital, primary care, public health care) (ICN n.d.).

According to the International Council of Nurses (ICN), a nurse practitioner is a registered nurse who has acquired the expert knowledge base, complex decision-making skills, and clinical competencies for expanded practice, the characteristics of which are shaped by the context and/or country in which he or she is credentialed to practice. Advanced practice in nursing is characterized not by job description, job title, or setting, but by knowledge and expertise, clinical judgment, skilled and self-initiated care, and

scholarly inquiry. The development of advanced expertise in a single technique or task does not constitute advanced practice nursing. A master's level degree is recommended for entry, as is official recognition of the educational programs undertaken, and a formal system of licensure, registration, certification, and credentialing (ICN n.d.).

The role of nurse practitioners was established in the United States in the mid-twentieth century to fill the gap created by the shortage of general practitioners. It has been estimated that approximately 70 countries now have established nurse practitioner roles or are exploring the possibility of introducing them. The ICN outlines the general characteristics of advanced practice nursing: integration of research, education, practice, and management; a high degree of professional autonomy and independent practice; case management/a personal case load; advanced health assessment skills, decision-making, and diagnostic reasoning skills; recognized advanced clinical competencies; provision of consultant services to other health providers; planning, implementation, and evaluation of programs; and functioning as the recognized first point of contact for clients (ICN n.d.).

In spite of the diversity in the role of nurse practitioners, research on the impact of nurse practitioners is often conducted only within a regional or a national setting and is of limited generalizability. Most available research findings originate in the United States, followed by the United Kingdom, and, to a lesser extent, other countries, such as Australia, Canada, and the Netherlands. Depending on the specifics of the role and the context in which the nurse practitioner is working, the benefits of this role have been reported in

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terms of improving access to care and continuity of care (Moote et al. 2011); providing an interprofessional skill mix in chronic disease management, which results in an improvement in the quality of care and patient satisfaction (Dennis et al. 2009); limiting escalating costs in health care (Hooker 2002; Dierick-van Daele et al. 2010); ensuring a sustainable workforce of health care providers (Lattimer et al. 1998); and advancing the careers of nurses (ICN n.d.). However, because of the diversity in roles, the evidence about the impact of nurse practitioners from an international perspective is often contradictory, as Laurant and colleagues (2009) reported when reviewing whether nurse practitioners improve the quality and cost-effectiveness of health care services. With growing widespread interest in advanced nursing practice, there is an urgent need for new high-quality research in different countries, which enables cross-country comparison. Researchers will have to take into account the differences in role evolution in order to arrive at meaningful comparisons of their findings.

The level of professionalization of nurse practitioners varies between countries, and their national and international representatives continue to work on the visibility of their profile and to advocate for the profession. Given the variability even within the same country, the challenge for nurse practitioners is to speak with a united voice, so that health care systems may embrace them as highly skilled, educated, and qualified health care providers. In the United States, where there are approximately 155,000 nurse practitioners, a national campaign was launched in 2011 to increase public awareness of nurse practitioners and the critical role they play in the health care system (AANP 2011). In other countries the focus is on scholarship, the regulation of roles, and the impact of nurse practitioners on health care services and systems.

The roles of the nurse practitioner are relatively new in some countries, and non-existent in the majority of countries. In the countries where these new roles are developing, they play an important part in modernizing the health care system (Institute of Medicine 2011). The educational programs and regulative systems for these roles continue to evolve, and the future for nurse practitioners looks promising. Much will depend on the success of patients, nurses, physicians, payers, policymakers, and other stakeholders in health care in collaboratively shaping its future, and on nurse practitioners being able to practice to the full extent of their training and education (Institute of Medicine 2011).

SEE ALSO: Allied Health Professionals; Health Maintenance Organization (HMO); Health Professions and Organization; Interprofessional Boundaries; Interprofessional Conflict; Nurses; Physician Assistant Profession

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