



Nurse Practitioner in General Practice – Position Statement

Australian Divisions of General Practice (ADGP) supports the role of nurse practitioner in the general practice setting, where the nurse practitioner works collaboratively with the general practitioner and the general practice team to enhance patient care.

ADGP acknowledges that many general practice nurses are currently working at advanced levels of practice and playing a very important role in the general practice setting.

Definition

The Australian Nursing and Midwifery Council has recently completed the Nurse Practitioner Standards Project (2004) which has included in its outcomes a comprehensive report on the development and progress of the role in Australia and New Zealand, an agreed description of the core role, and an approved set of competency standards for nurse practitioner.

The report describes of the core role of nurse practitioner in Australia utilising the following definition:

A nurse practitioner is a registered nurse educated to function autonomously and collaboratively in an advanced and extended clinical role. The nurse practitioner role includes assessment and management of clients using nursing knowledge and skills and may include but is not limited to direct referral of patients to other health care professionals, prescribing medications, and ordering diagnostic investigations. The nurse practitioner role is grounded in the nursing profession's values, knowledge, theories and practice and provides innovative and flexible health care delivery that complements other health care providers. The scope of practice of the nurse practitioner is determined by the context in which the nurse practitioner is authorised to practice.

All nurses are accountable for their actions and have authority to act autonomously in determining nursing responses to nursing assessments. Nurse practitioners experience increased accountability and autonomy within the context of the extended scope of practice they are legitimately approved to carry out.

The title of nurse practitioner should not be confused with that of practice nurse. The title of nurse practitioner is protected in state and territory Nurses Acts and similar legislation; making it an offence for use of the title by any other than those authorised to do so.

A practice nurse is a registered or enrolled nurse working in a general practice setting.

Background

In Australia, the development of the role for nurse practitioner is relatively new, and has been informed by overseas experiences and the unique features of delivering health care services in Australia. Such features include geographical isolation, inequitable distribution of health services particularly between remote and rural areas compared to inner urban areas, difficulties attracting and retaining doctors in remote and rural areas, and the poor record in the provision of health services to the Indigenous population ¹.

The findings of the *Nurse Practitioner Standards Project* showed that nurse practitioners in Australia and New Zealand work across a range of clinical settings, provide specific health service to specific populations and are located in many speciality areas of health care.

Implementation of the nurse practitioner role has required substantial amendment of health care Acts and regulations. The Acts and regulations are set by parliament and provide the broad legal framework within which the nurse practitioner may practice.

The responsibility for authorisation or endorsement for nurse practitioner is the responsibility of the nursing regulatory bodies in the states and territories. Requirements for authorisation vary between these jurisdictions and are influenced by a range of factors including compliance with legislative process set out in relevant Acts and regulations. State health authorities may also maintain authority for approving nurse practitioner guidelines and protocols and approving positions within the state health system.

Potential candidates for nurse practitioner must satisfy a diverse range of authorisation criteria including educational preparation which is usually required at master's degree or equivalent, advanced clinical practice, collaborative arrangements, professional leadership and development and evidenced based practice.

Renewal of nurse practitioner authorisation is required in all jurisdictions with the renewal period ranging from annually to every five years and can include random audits.

It is the position of ADGP that:

1. Models for supporting the establishment of nurse practitioners roles in primary care should complement and support the role of the general practitioner.
2. The role for the nurse practitioner in general practice will evolve as multidisciplinary models of care are advanced, in order to enhance existing service provision and improve access to primary care for all consumers.
3. The scope of practice of the nurse practitioner in general practice needs to be defined and determined to meet the primary health care needs of the local population.
4. Funding models for general practice need to provide support for the engagement of nurse practitioners where community need is identified.

5. Courses preparing nurse practitioners to work in primary care should include experience in the general practice setting, and input from the general practice specialty.
6. Nurse practitioners working in specialist fields outside of general practice should establish strong communication links with the patient's general practice team.

Acknowledgement

In preparing this position statement ADGP would like to acknowledge the investigative work undertaken by the Osborne Division of General Practice WA in 2003 to examine the feasibility of nurse practitioners in general practice

¹ Queensland University of Technology, 2004. *Report to the Australian Nursing Council. Nurse Practitioner Standards Project.*