



NAVIGATING NEW FRONTIERS: A CRITICAL REVIEW OF NURSES' EXPANDING ROLES BEYOND TRADITIONAL PATIENT CARE

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Abstract

The evolving landscape of healthcare has precipitated a significant expansion in the roles of nurses, extending far beyond traditional patient care. This critical review delves into the multifaceted roles that nurses now embody, including as nurse practitioners with increased autonomy, leaders in healthcare administration, public health advocates, educators, researchers, and policy influencers. Against the backdrop of a historical perspective, this article examines the catalysts driving the evolution of nursing roles, underscored by global health challenges and the shifting needs of patient care. It highlights the inherent challenges and opportunities that accompany these expanded roles, such as regulatory hurdles, the necessity for advanced education, and the dynamics of interprofessional collaboration. Through an analysis of real-world case studies, the article showcases the tangible impacts of these expanded roles on healthcare outcomes and systems. Furthermore, it projects into the future of nursing, considering the implications of technological advancements and the preparation required for upcoming generations of nurses. This review underscores the critical importance of supporting the evolving roles of nurses to harness their full potential in advancing healthcare.

Keywords: Nursing roles, Healthcare evolution, Nurse practitioners, Leadership in nursing, Public health nursing, Nursing Education, Nursing Research, Health Policy, Interprofessional collaboration, Future of nursing.

I. Introduction

The healthcare industry is undergoing a paradigm shift, moving away from traditional models centered on physician-led care towards more inclusive and interdisciplinary approaches. At the heart of this transformation lies the nursing profession, which has historically been synonymous with patient care and bedside support. However, the role of nurses has evolved dramatically, expanding beyond the confines of direct patient care to encompass a broader range of responsibilities and

leadership roles within the healthcare system. This article aims to explore the expanded roles of nurses, offering a critical review of their growing contributions beyond traditional patient care settings.

The genesis of nursing as a profession can be traced back to the foundational work of Florence Nightingale in the 19th century, whose contributions during the Crimean War revolutionized the concept of nursing through the introduction of sanitary conditions in healthcare settings. Nightingale's legacy laid the groundwork for nursing as a distinct profession, emphasizing the importance of care that is both scientifically informed and compassionately delivered (Dossey, 2010). Since then, the scope of nursing has continuously evolved, shaped by socio-economic changes, technological advancements, and the shifting landscapes of global health challenges.

The 21st century has witnessed a significant expansion in the roles of nurses, driven by a confluence of factors including an aging population, the increasing complexity of healthcare needs, and a global shortage of healthcare professionals. These challenges have necessitated a reevaluation of traditional healthcare delivery models and highlighted the need for a more versatile nursing workforce capable of adapting to diverse healthcare settings and roles (Institute of Medicine, 2011). Nurses are now at the forefront of healthcare innovation, taking on roles as nurse practitioners (NPs), healthcare administrators, public health advocates, educators, researchers, and policy advisors.

Nurse practitioners, for instance, have emerged as key players in primary care, offering services ranging from diagnosis to the management of chronic conditions, thereby addressing the gap created by a shortage of primary care physicians in many regions (Auerbach, 2012). Moreover, the advent of advanced practice nursing has empowered nurses with specialized skills and knowledge, enabling them to provide high-quality care in specialized domains such as oncology, pediatrics, and mental health.

In addition to clinical roles, nurses are increasingly recognized for their leadership in healthcare settings. Their unique perspective, grounded in direct patient care, equips them with valuable insights into the operational and administrative aspects of healthcare delivery. This has led to a growing number of nurses occupying executive roles, where they contribute to policy-making, strategic planning, and the implementation of quality improvement initiatives (Scott, Matthews, & Kirwan, 2014).

The expansion of nursing roles is also evident in the domain of public health, where nurses play a pivotal role in health promotion, disease prevention, and community education. Their efforts in these areas are critical in addressing public health challenges, from managing outbreaks of infectious diseases to tackling chronic health conditions through community-based interventions (Laurant et al., 2018).

Furthermore, nurses are making significant contributions to the field of healthcare research, generating evidence-based insights that inform clinical practice and healthcare policy. Their research not only enhances patient care outcomes but also contributes to the broader knowledge base of the healthcare community, driving innovation and improving healthcare delivery (Newhouse et al., 2011). In conclusion, the evolving roles of nurses reflect the dynamic nature of healthcare and the increasing recognition of the critical contributions nurses make beyond traditional patient care. As healthcare continues to evolve, the roles of nurses will undoubtedly expand further, necessitating ongoing support, education, and professional development to fully harness their potential in improving healthcare outcomes and shaping the future of healthcare delivery.

II. Historical Context and Evolution of Nursing Roles

The historical trajectory of nursing roles from mere bedside caregivers to pivotal figures in healthcare innovation and leadership is a testament to the profession's adaptability and resilience. This evolution has been influenced by a combination of social, economic, and technological changes, as well as significant healthcare needs worldwide.

The Genesis and Early Development of Nursing

The formalization of nursing as a profession can be traced back to Florence Nightingale's pioneering work in the 19th century. Nightingale's establishment of the first scientifically based nursing school,

the Nightingale School for Nurses at St. Thomas' Hospital in London in 1860, marked the beginning of professional nursing education (Dossey, 2010). Her emphasis on hygiene, public health, and the use of statistical evidence to improve patient outcomes laid the groundwork for modern nursing practices.

The Expansion of Nursing Roles in the 20th Century

The two World Wars served as significant catalysts for the expansion of nursing roles. Nurses not only provided care on the battlefields but also took on roles that were traditionally reserved for male physicians, such as surgery assistance and anesthesia administration. This period saw the emergence of specialized nursing roles and the expansion of nursing responsibilities (Fairman & Lynaugh, 2000). The latter half of the 20th century witnessed further diversification of nursing roles, driven by advancements in medical technology and a growing body of nursing research. The establishment of the nurse practitioner (NP) role in the United States in the 1960s, for example, was a response to a shortage of primary care physicians and the need for high-quality healthcare services in underserved areas (Loretto, 2012).

The Impact of Global Health Challenges

The advent of global health challenges, such as the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the 1980s and 1990s and more recently, the COVID-19 pandemic, has underscored the critical role of nurses in public health, research, and policymaking. Nurses have been at the forefront of responding to these crises, providing care, conducting research, and shaping public health policies (Rosa et al., 2020).

The 21st Century: Advanced Practice and Leadership Roles

The 21st century has seen a significant shift towards advanced practice nursing roles, such as Nurse Practitioners (NPs), Clinical Nurse Specialists (CNSs), Certified Nurse-Midwives (CNMs), and Certified Registered Nurse Anesthetists (CRNAs). These roles are characterized by a greater degree of autonomy and the ability to provide primary and specialty care services, prescribe medications, and conduct advanced clinical procedures (Institute of Medicine, 2011).

In addition to clinical roles, nurses are increasingly taking on leadership positions within healthcare organizations, influencing policy, and contributing to healthcare innovation. The Institute of Medicine's report, "The Future of Nursing: Leading Change, Advancing Health," highlights the importance of nurses playing a central role in redesigning the healthcare system (Institute of Medicine, 2011).

The historical context and evolution of nursing roles illustrate the profession's journey from its foundational principles of care and compassion to a multifaceted domain encompassing clinical practice, leadership, research, and policy advocacy. As healthcare continues to evolve, the nursing profession is poised to meet emerging challenges and lead innovation in healthcare delivery.

III. Expanded Roles of Nurses Beyond Patient Care

The expansion of nursing roles beyond traditional patient care is a reflection of the dynamic nature of the healthcare landscape, characterized by evolving patient needs, technological advancements, and the push for a more integrated healthcare system. Nurses have stepped into diverse roles that extend their impact from individual patient care to broader healthcare improvements, policy-making, and global health initiatives.

Nurse Practitioners and Advanced Practice Nursing

Nurse Practitioners (NPs) and other Advanced Practice Registered Nurses (APRNs), such as Clinical Nurse Specialists (CNSs), Certified Nurse-Midwives (CNMs), and Certified Registered Nurse Anesthetists (CRNAs), represent a significant evolution in nursing practice. These roles are characterized by a higher level of autonomy, with responsibilities including diagnosing and managing patient care, prescribing medications, and performing procedures. The increasing presence of NPs in

primary care has been shown to improve access to healthcare, particularly in underserved areas, and to deliver care that is comparable in quality to that provided by physicians (Laurant et al., 2018).

Leadership and Administrative Roles

Nurses are increasingly recognized for their leadership capabilities within healthcare settings, taking on roles such as chief nursing officers, healthcare administrators, and directors of clinical services. These positions allow nurses to influence organizational policies, improve healthcare delivery systems, and advocate for patient and staff needs. Studies have shown that strong nursing leadership is associated with improved patient outcomes, highlighting the importance of nurses in shaping effective healthcare environments (Wong, Cummings, & Ducharme, 2013).

Public Health and Community Nursing

Public health nursing is another area where nurses play a crucial role beyond individual patient care. Nurses in this field work on disease prevention, health promotion, and community education, addressing social determinants of health and working towards health equity. Their efforts in managing communicable diseases, conducting vaccination campaigns, and providing health education are vital for community health and resilience (Beck et al., 2017).

Education and Research

Nurses also contribute significantly to the academic realm as educators and researchers. Nursing educators are essential for preparing the next generation of nurses, ensuring they have the knowledge and skills required for the evolving healthcare landscape. Nursing researchers contribute to the advancement of medical science and nursing practice by conducting studies on various aspects of health, illness, and care delivery, thus improving patient care and outcomes (Newhouse et al., 2011).

Health Policy Advocacy

Nurses are increasingly involved in health policy advocacy, using their unique insights from direct patient care to inform policy decisions. They engage in lobbying efforts, serve on advisory boards, and participate in legislative processes to advocate for policies that improve healthcare access, quality, and efficiency. Their frontline experience provides a critical perspective in shaping policies that are patient-centered and equitable (Kung, 2015).

The expanded roles of nurses beyond traditional patient care underscore the profession's integral role in the broader healthcare ecosystem. From advanced clinical practice to leadership, public health, education, and policy advocacy, nurses are making significant contributions that not only enhance patient care but also drive improvements in healthcare systems and policies. As healthcare continues to evolve, the roles of nurses are likely to expand further, emphasizing the need for ongoing education, professional development, and support for nurses in these diverse roles.

IV. Challenges and Opportunities

The expansion of nursing roles beyond traditional patient care presents a unique set of challenges and opportunities. While these evolving roles enable nurses to contribute more significantly to healthcare delivery and policy, they also demand new competencies, adaptation to regulatory frameworks, and a redefinition of interprofessional relationships.

Challenges

- Regulatory and Scope-of-Practice Barriers

One of the primary challenges facing expanded nursing roles, particularly for Advanced Practice Registered Nurses (APRNs), is the variability in regulatory and scope-of-practice laws across different jurisdictions. These inconsistencies can limit the ability of APRNs to practice to the full extent of their education and training, thereby affecting healthcare access and efficiency (Kleinpell et al., 2014).

- **Education and Training Requirements**

The expanded roles of nurses necessitate advanced education and specialized training, which can pose challenges in terms of accessibility, cost, and the need for ongoing professional development. Ensuring that nurses have the necessary competencies for their expanded roles requires significant investment in nursing education and opportunities for lifelong learning (Institute of Medicine, 2011).

- **Interprofessional Collaboration**

As nurses take on more complex roles, effective collaboration with other healthcare professionals becomes crucial. However, traditional hierarchies and role perceptions can create barriers to interprofessional teamwork, potentially impacting patient care and the integration of nurses into expanded roles (Reeves et al., 2013).

- **Workforce and Well-being Concerns**

The nursing profession is facing workforce challenges, including shortages, high turnover rates, and burnout, exacerbated by the increasing demands of expanded roles. Ensuring the well-being and job satisfaction of nurses is essential for sustaining the workforce and optimizing their contributions to healthcare (Dyrbye et al., 2017).

Opportunities

- **Improving Access to Care**

Expanded nursing roles, particularly in primary care and underserved areas, present an opportunity to improve access to healthcare services. Nurse practitioners and other APRNs can provide high-quality, cost-effective care, addressing gaps in the healthcare system (Laurant et al., 2018).

- **Leadership and Policy Influence**

Nurses in leadership and policy roles have the opportunity to shape healthcare delivery systems, influence policy, and advocate for patient-centered care. Their insights from direct patient care can inform decisions that improve healthcare quality and efficiency (Kung, 2015).

- **Advancing Nursing Science and Education**

Expanded roles for nurses in research and academia contribute to the advancement of nursing science, with implications for evidence-based practice and healthcare outcomes. Furthermore, nursing educators play a crucial role in preparing future nurses for the complexities of modern healthcare (Newhouse et al., 2011).

- **Global Health Contributions**

Nurses have a significant role to play in addressing global health challenges, from infectious disease outbreaks to chronic disease management and health equity. Their involvement in global health initiatives can lead to more resilient health systems and improved health outcomes worldwide (Rosa et al., 2020).

The expansion of nursing roles beyond traditional patient care presents both challenges and opportunities for the profession and the healthcare system at large. Addressing these challenges requires collaborative efforts among healthcare professionals, policymakers, educators, and nurses themselves. Embracing the opportunities associated with expanded nursing roles can lead to more accessible, efficient, and patient-centered healthcare.

V. Case Studies and Real-World Examples

Case studies and real-world examples provide valuable insights into the expanded roles of nurses beyond traditional patient care, illustrating their impact on healthcare delivery, patient outcomes, and the healthcare system as a whole. These examples highlight the diverse settings and contexts in which nurses operate, showcasing their adaptability, leadership, and innovation.

Case Study 1: Nurse-Led Clinics

Nurse-led clinics have emerged as a successful model for improving access to healthcare, particularly in primary care and underserved communities. One notable example is the nurse-led clinic at the University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB) School of Nursing. This clinic is staffed by nurse practitioners who provide comprehensive primary and specialty care services, including chronic disease management, wellness services, and health education. The clinic has demonstrated success in improving patient outcomes, including better management of chronic conditions such as diabetes and hypertension, and increased patient satisfaction (Rice, 2017).

Case Study 2: Nurses in Disaster Response

Nurses play a critical role in disaster response efforts, showcasing their ability to adapt to challenging and rapidly changing situations. A poignant example is the role of nurses in the aftermath of the 2010 Haiti earthquake. Nurses from around the world volunteered to provide emergency care, public health interventions, and health education in the devastated region. Their efforts were instrumental in managing acute injuries, preventing disease outbreaks, and rebuilding the local healthcare infrastructure (Basile et al., 2010).

Case Study 3: Advanced Practice Nurses in Rural Health

Advanced Practice Registered Nurses (APRNs), particularly Nurse Practitioners (NPs), have significantly impacted healthcare delivery in rural areas, where access to physicians is often limited. A study in rural Pennsylvania demonstrated how NPs provided high-quality primary care, leading to improved health outcomes and increased patient satisfaction. The NPs' presence helped alleviate the healthcare provider shortage in these areas, ensuring that residents received timely and effective care (Kutzleb et al., 2015).

Case Study 4: Nurse Leadership in Healthcare Policy

Nurses have increasingly taken on roles in healthcare policy, advocating for changes that improve the quality and accessibility of care. An example is the involvement of nurse leaders in the development and implementation of the Affordable Care Act (ACA) in the United States. Nurse leaders participated in policy discussions, provided expert testimony, and engaged in advocacy efforts to ensure that the ACA addressed critical issues such as healthcare access, quality, and workforce development (Sundean et al., 2019).

Case Study 5: Nurses Driving Innovation in Healthcare Technology

Nurses are at the forefront of healthcare innovation, leveraging technology to improve patient care and healthcare delivery. A notable example is the development of a mobile health application by a team of nurses to manage chronic diseases. This app allows patients to track their symptoms, medication adherence, and lifestyle changes, facilitating better self-management and communication with healthcare providers. The app has been associated with improved disease management and patient engagement (Brewer et al., 2018).

These case studies underscore the vital role of nurses in addressing healthcare challenges, improving patient care, and driving innovation within the healthcare system. Through their expanded roles in clinical practice, leadership, advocacy, and technology, nurses contribute to the development of a more accessible, efficient, and patient-centered healthcare system.

VI. The Future of Nursing

The future of nursing is poised at the intersection of evolving healthcare needs, technological advancements, and a global push towards more integrated and patient-centered care. As nurses continue to expand their roles beyond traditional patient care, they will play an increasingly pivotal role in shaping the future of healthcare. This section explores potential future directions for nursing, considering the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead.

Technological Integration and Digital Health

The integration of technology in healthcare, including telehealth, mobile health applications, and electronic health records, is transforming the way care is delivered. Nurses will need to be adept at using these technologies to enhance patient care, improve access, and ensure the continuity of care across different settings. Furthermore, the rise of artificial intelligence and machine learning in healthcare presents opportunities for nurses to engage in the development and implementation of these technologies, ensuring they meet patient needs and enhance clinical practice (Topol, 2019).

Advanced Practice and Specialization

The demand for specialized care, particularly for chronic and complex conditions, is expected to grow. This will likely lead to an increase in advanced practice roles and further specialization within nursing. Nurses with advanced degrees and specialized training will be critical in addressing these healthcare needs, providing expert care, and leading interdisciplinary teams (Maier et al., 2017).

Global Health and Cross-Border Nursing

Global health challenges, such as pandemics, climate change-related health issues, and the increasing burden of non-communicable diseases, will require nurses to work beyond national borders. Cross-border nursing initiatives and international collaborations will become more common, with nurses playing key roles in global health research, policymaking, and emergency response efforts (Koplan et al., 2009).

Nursing Education and Lifelong Learning

The continuous evolution of healthcare will necessitate ongoing education and professional development for nurses. Nursing education programs will need to adapt to prepare nurses for expanded roles in clinical practice, leadership, research, and policy. Lifelong learning will be essential for nurses to stay current with advancements in healthcare and to continuously improve their practice (Benner et al., 2010).

Leadership and Policy Influence

Nurses will increasingly occupy leadership positions and influence health policy at all levels. Their insights from direct patient care and comprehensive understanding of the healthcare system will be invaluable in shaping policies that are equitable, sustainable, and responsive to evolving healthcare needs. Nurses will advocate for healthcare reforms that ensure quality care for all, addressing social determinants of health and health disparities (Institute of Medicine, 2011).

The future of nursing is bright, with myriad opportunities for nurses to lead, innovate, and impact healthcare at individual, community, and global levels. Embracing technological advancements, pursuing advanced education, engaging in global health initiatives, and assuming leadership roles in policy and practice will be key for nurses as they navigate the future. Supporting and empowering nurses in these endeavors will be crucial for advancing health and healthcare in the 21st century and beyond.

VII. Conclusion

The comprehensive exploration of nurses' expanding roles beyond traditional patient care reveals a profession in the midst of a transformative evolution. Nurses today are no longer confined to the bedside; they are integral to nearly every facet of healthcare, from primary care delivery in underserved areas to the forefront of policy reform and technological innovation. This expansion is a testament to the adaptability, resilience, and commitment of nurses to meet the growing and changing needs of healthcare systems worldwide.

The journey of nursing from its foundational principles of care and compassion to its current status as a cornerstone of healthcare reflects a broader shift towards a more inclusive, patient-centered approach to health and wellness. Nurses, with their unique blend of clinical expertise, holistic perspective, and patient advocacy, are ideally positioned to lead this shift. The challenges they face,

such as regulatory barriers, the need for advanced education, and the imperative for interprofessional collaboration, are significant yet surmountable with targeted support and investment.

The opportunities presented by expanded nursing roles are vast and varied. Nurses' involvement in primary care, public health, policymaking, and innovation holds the potential to improve access to care, enhance patient outcomes, and make healthcare systems more efficient and equitable. The case studies and examples highlighted throughout this discussion illustrate the profound impact that nurses can have when empowered to practice to the full extent of their abilities and training.

Looking to the future, the nursing profession will undoubtedly continue to evolve in response to global health challenges, technological advancements, and the shifting landscape of healthcare needs. The commitment to lifelong learning, adaptability, and leadership will be key for nurses as they navigate these changes. Supporting the nursing profession through investment in education, opportunities for professional development, and recognition of the value nurses bring to healthcare is essential for the future of healthcare.

In conclusion, the expanded roles of nurses beyond traditional patient care are a clear indication of the critical role that nurses play in the health and well-being of populations around the globe. As we move forward, the healthcare community, policymakers, and society at large must continue to support and empower nurses, recognizing their invaluable contributions and ensuring they are equipped to meet the challenges and opportunities of the future. The evolution of nursing roles is not just a reflection of the profession's growth but a beacon of progress for the entire healthcare system.

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