

Professional Practice in Nursing: A Framework

Francine Girard, RN, BN, MN, PhD
Senior Vice President, Professional Practice and Research
Chief Nursing Officer
Calgary Health Region
Calgary, AB

Noreen Linton, RN, BN, MN
Director, Chief Nursing Portfolio
Calgary Health Region
Calgary, AB

Jeanne Besner, RN, PhD
Director, Research Initiatives in Nursing and Health
Calgary Health Region
Calgary, AB

Abstract

Ensuring that nurses can practise according to the philosophical underpinnings of their profession is recognized as an important factor in job satisfaction and is therefore a key element of retention and recruitment of the nursing workforce. Creating a culture of excellence requires making explicit a set of values and performance expectations to which all nurses can subscribe and that influences practice behaviours. The vice president and chief nursing officer of a large health region in Western Canada therefore sought to establish a foundation for building such a culture of excellence, through the creation of a mission, vision and Professional Practice Framework for the region's nurses. The author describes the development of the nursing Professional Practice Framework for this health region, presents the results of a participatory approach to promoting nurses' ownership of the model and discusses plans for assessing the impact of the framework on nurses' practice and patient care.

The past decade in healthcare has been characterized by hospital restructuring, with mergers of previously independent organizations and their associated cultures into larger, regionalized entities. Concurrently, cutbacks due to fiscal constraints during the 1990s contributed to heavy workloads, long hours and reported difficulty by nurses in carrying out their professional roles (Baumann et al. 2001). Recognizing the importance of practice environments that conform to the philosophy of care held by the nursing profession (Baumann et al. 2001), many organizations have developed professional practice models to guide nursing care delivery, with the goal of empowering the nursing workforce and improving the quality of patient care (London Health Sciences Centre 2004; Ottawa Hospital 2004; University Health Network 2004).

The newly appointed vice president and chief nursing officer (CNO) of the Calgary Health Region (“the Region”) requested that the Regional Nursing Council begin work on developing a Professional Practice Framework for nursing. A task force was struck, with a mandate to complete a first draft of the framework by Nursing Week (May 2003).

This paper describes the process used to solicit input into the development of the framework and presents results of the participatory approach to obtaining ownership of the model by nurses. It concludes with a brief commentary on plans for assessing the impact of the framework on nurses’ practice and on patient care.

Literature Support

Ensuring that nurses can practise according to the philosophical underpinnings of their profession is recognized as an important factor in job satisfaction and hence is critical to retention and recruitment of the nursing workforce (Baumann et al. 2001). Employers share responsibility with nurses, professional associations and others for promoting environments that support quality professional practice (Canadian Nurses Association 2001). Achieving high-quality healthcare requires that we make explicit the expectations related to professional nursing practice (Ferguson-Pare et al. 2002). Nurses’ effectiveness in achieving the outcomes for which they are accountable is inextricably tied to the extent to which they can exercise control over the delivery of care for which they are responsible (Hoffart and Woods 1996). Professional practice models generally address nurses’ need for autonomy and accountability and are considered important to organizational empowerment of nurses and to the creation of effective work teams (Spence Laschinger and Havens 1996). A set of values and performance expectations to which all nurses can subscribe and that influences practice behaviours is essential to creating a culture of excellence (Kramer 1990). Achieving excellence in nursing practice was the aim in development of the Calgary Health Region Professional Practice Framework.

Development of the Framework

One of the first priorities of the vice president and CNO of the Calgary Health Region was to develop a vision for nursing in the Region. Through the development of this vision, it became apparent that a mission for nursing was also essential. As this work progressed, an evident need emerged to establish a definition of professional practice and a guideline or framework that nurses could utilize on a daily basis to achieve the vision and mission of nursing in the Region. This foundational work is described in Figure 1.

The mission and vision formed the foundation on which development of the Professional Practice Framework was based. An important first step was to articulate clearly, in concise terms, the meaning of “professional nursing practice.” Consultation with nurses in the Region provided the substance from which the following definition was crafted:

Professional nursing practice is a commitment to compassion, caring and strong ethical values; continuous development of self and others; accountability and responsibility for insightful practice; demonstrating a spirit of collaboration and flexibility.

Figure 1. Vision and mission for nursing, Calgary Health Region

Our vision for nursing:

Excellent healthcare through professional nursing practice.

Nursing mission:

We are committed to professional nursing practice that promotes quality, family-centred care and efficient and effective delivery of integrated services provided in collaboration with community partners and members of the multidisciplinary healthcare team.

One of the main concerns of the task force mandated with the development of the Professional Practice Framework was that all nurses be given the opportunity for involvement in its development. Hence, a participatory approach was used to solicit nurses’ input. A number of focus groups were held, which were offered at different times of the day on various days of the week and at various sites across the Region. Subsequent to analysis of the focus group data, questionnaires to validate the focus group findings were distributed in hard copy at all regional sites and simultaneously placed on the internal website to increase access for nurses in the Region and to invite them to complete the survey.

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of the focus groups was to obtain nurses’ views about the defining elements of professional nursing practice within the Region. Three questions were asked of participants in the focus groups, only the first of which is addressed in this paper:

1. How would you describe an exemplary “professional” nurse?
2. In light of those attributes, what do you think is the current status of professional nursing practice in the Calgary Health Region?
3. What can the Region do to support and promote professional nursing practice?

Methodology and Limitations

Eighteen focus groups were held from early January to late February 2002, with a total of 156 participants in attendance. Three of these focus groups were considered “expert” groups, two with the Regional Nursing Council and one with representatives of the clinical nurse educators. The remaining 15 groups were composed of nurses (primarily registered nurses, with a few licensed practical nurses) working in a variety of practice settings (e.g., home care, public health, acute care) and sites (hospitals and community-based offices or clinics).

All focus groups were moderated by one of two facilitators who were employees of the Region. Group discussions were either audiotaped and later transcribed, or summarized directly onto a laptop computer by one of the group moderators. Subsequent to the focus groups, a questionnaire was constructed and a Region-wide survey conducted with nurses to validate the components of the Professional Practice Framework. Statements on the questionnaire were derived from the themes that had emerged during focus group consultations. These included eight statements focusing on the art of nursing, eight related to competence, eight dealing with attributes of practice and 10 with personal commitment. A total of 482 respondents returned a completed questionnaire. Consistently, respondents indicated high agreement with the statements on the questionnaire, confirming that the elements of the framework that had emerged from the focus groups resonated with the larger sample of nurses in the Region.

Respondent Profile

Almost all respondents to the survey were registered nurses (RNs). A majority (44%) held a baccalaureate degree in nursing, closely followed by diploma-prepared nurses (40%). A small number of respondents (9%) were prepared at the graduate level. Only 2% of respondents were licensed practical nurses (LPNs) and 3% were registered psychiatric nurses (RPNs). The proportion of LPN and RPN respondents was only slightly less than their proportional numbers in the total nursing staff mix of the Region at the time the survey was conducted. More than half the respondents (51%) worked in acute care settings. Public health (11%), ambulatory care (10%) and home care settings (10%) were equally represented, followed closely by mental health (8%). Only 3% of respondents held administrative positions. Three-quarters (74%) of respondents had 10 or more years’ experience in nursing, compared to only 3% with less than one year in nursing practice. Respondents with one to four (11%) or five to nine (11%) years’ experience were equally represented.

Discussion of Results

From focus group comments and their subsequent validation through the quantitative survey, a draft Professional Practice Framework was presented for consideration and further development by the Regional Nursing Council. The components that follow were derived from nurses' input.

1. The art of nursing

Professional nursing practice is grounded in the art of nursing, described as taking a holistic, client-centred focus; being caring and ethical in interactions with patients, families and colleagues; having above-average interpersonal skills; and making sound judgments based on experience and knowledge, thus averting potential problems.

2. Competence

Professional practice demands competence in relation to knowledge and technical skills. This requires not only a broad base of knowledge, but also depth of knowledge in a chosen area of practice, a desire and ability to continue developing that knowledge base and to share it with others and critical thinking in decision-making.

3. Attributes of Practice

Professional practice reflects a particular approach to one's work, with collaboration by far the most salient characteristic. Professional nursing practice means working in partnership with other nurses and health professionals in providing client care, being highly organized in managing activities and time, having the ability to manage many complex tasks simultaneously, working autonomously as appropriate and having an open mind and nonjudgmental manner.

4. Personal commitment

In describing this element of professional practice, respondents referred to the importance of having confidence in one's abilities and taking responsibility for one's actions, including having a sound understanding of the boundaries and limitations of nursing practice. Having a balanced lifestyle and supporting the advancement of the profession were also considered important characteristics of a professional nurse.

Approval of the Framework

After several months of consultations with nurses across the Region, discussion at Regional Nursing Council and numerous revisions, the final draft of the Professional Practice Framework was approved by Nursing Council and distributed during Nurses Week 2003. The Professional Nursing Practice Framework for the Calgary Health Region is depicted in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Professional Nursing Practice Framework, Calgary Health Region



The Art of Nursing

Nurses demonstrate ethical, insightful, caring practice by focusing on the health and well-being of individuals, families and communities in health and during episodes of illness and transition.

Competence

Nurses' competence is grounded upon nursing theory, scientific knowledge and experience, and is reflected in everyday practice. It is enhanced through continuous learning, shared through mentorship and supported through intra- and interprofessional dialogue.

Attributes of Practice

Autonomous professional practice in nursing requires taking personal responsibility for excellence in practice and effective collaboration with multidisciplinary team members in meeting the health needs of the population.

Personal Commitment

Nurses demonstrate commitment to the profession by valuing nurses and nursing, contributing to the advancement of the profession and continually striving for excellence in patient care.

The framework is congruent with the values of the Calgary Health Region (Honesty, Integrity, Dignity, Trust, Respect, Responsiveness, Creativity and Learning). It reflects elements that are common to other professional practice frameworks described in the literature (Behrend et al. 1986; Hannah and Shamian 1992; Hoffart and Woods 1996; Joy and Malay 1992; University Health Network 2003). The framework reinforces the prerequisites for the promotion of safe, competent and ethical nursing practice that are inherent in the standards of practice and code of conduct of the Alberta Association of Registered Nurses (AARN), the professional body that regulates the practice of registered nurses in the province.

The framework was illustrated in a pamphlet distributed to all nurses in the Region during Nurses Week. Incorporated in the pamphlet was a pocket card summarizing the elements of the framework, providing a quick reference and enhancing the

likelihood that the framework would be utilized on a day-to-day basis as a guide to practice.

The framework logo depicted in Figure 2 was designed by one of the members of Regional Nursing Council (Sharon Witt) and is an expression of her belief that the nurse's cap has traditionally been an important symbol of professionalism in nursing.

Implementation of the Framework

Once the Professional Practice Framework was developed, it was important that it “come alive” for all nurses practising in the Region. Numerous sessions were held (some using telehealth technology) to familiarize nursing staff with the framework when it was first launched, and introduction to the framework is now routinely incorporated into the orientation of all new nurses who join the Region. The framework also guides the development of preceptors and charge nurses.

The major elements of the framework have been linked to the expected RN, LPN and RPN competencies articulated in job descriptions, and application of the framework in practice is now incorporated into nurses' ongoing professional development and continuing education plans. A clinical mentorship program based on the competencies associated with professional practice in the Region is under development, as is a position paper on patient safety and professional nursing practice.

Further elaboration of the framework will be ongoing. For example, use of the framework has exposed the need to clarify some of its terms, such as “insightful practice.” Using a process not unlike that which guided development of the Professional Practice Framework, input will again be sought to ensure that a definition of insightful practice is elaborated that will resonate with nurses in the Region.

Evaluation and Research

Now that the Professional Practice Framework has been articulated, it will be important to determine the effectiveness with which it is being implemented across the many sites and settings in this large regional health authority and measure its impact on practice and patient outcomes. Over the course of the next several years, specific implementation initiatives will be targeted for evaluation and research. An overarching framework will be developed to guide the evaluation of specific initiatives. Answers will be sought to such questions as: What facilitated “internalization” of the Professional Practice Framework? Did its implementation change nursing practice on select units? Did changes in nursing practice affect the roles of other members of the healthcare team? What difference, if any, did implementation of a Professional Practice Framework make in job satisfaction and patient outcomes? What went well in implementing the framework? What could have been done differently?

Conclusion

The process of developing a Professional Practice Framework for the Calgary Health Region demanded considerable time and effort on the part of a multitude of nurses. The resolve to reflect accurately the language of nurses in developing the framework was vital to defining professional practice in a manner that promoted ownership of the final product by nurses in the Region. It will now be important to examine the extent to which elaboration of this framework helps nurses achieve increased meaning and continually strive to attain higher levels of excellence in their work. It is hoped that the development of an explicit model to guide practice will ultimately help nurses feel pride in their profession and value the tremendous contribution that they and nursing make to the healthcare system.

References

- Baumann, A., L. O'Brien-Pallas, M. Armstrong-Stassen et al. 2001. *Commitment and Care: The Benefits of a Healthy Workplace for Nurses, Their Patients and the System. A Policy Synthesis*. Ottawa: Canadian Health Services Research Foundation. Retrieved May 3, 2005. <http://www.nlcchr.mun.ca/dwnlds/CHSRF_2001a.pdf>.
- Behrend, B.J, D.A. Finch, C.A. Emerick and K. Scoble. 1986. "Articulating Professional Nursing Practice Behaviors." *Journal of Nursing Administration* 16(2): 20–24.
- Canadian Nurses Association. 2001. *Position Statement: Quality Professional Practice Environments for Registered Nurses*. Ottawa: Author. Retrieved May 3, 2005. <http://www.cna-nurses.ca/CNA/documents/pdf/publications/PS53_Quality_Prof_Practice_Env_RNs_Nov_2001_e.pdf>.
- Ferguson-Pare, M., T. Closson and S. Tully. 2002. "Nursing Best Practice Guidelines: A Gift for Advancing Professional Practice in Every Environment." *Hospital Quarterly* 5(3): 66–68.
- Hoffart, N. and C.Q. Woods. 1996. "Elements of a Nursing Professional Practice Model." *Journal of Professional Nursing* 12(6): 354–64.
- Joy, L. and M. Malay. 1992. "Evaluation Instruments to Measure Professional Nursing Practice." *Nursing Management* 23(7): 73–77.
- Kramer, M. 1990. "The Magnet Hospitals: Excellence Revisited." *Journal of Nursing Administration* 20(9): 35–44.
- Spence Laschinger, H.K. and D.S. Havens. 1996. "Staff Nurse Work Empowerment and Perceived Control Over Nursing Practice." In E.C. Hein, ed., *Contemporary Leadership Behavior: Selected Readings* (5th ed., pp. 177–86). New York: Lippincott.
- London Health Sciences Centre. 2004. "What Is a Professional Practice Model?" Retrieved May 3, 2005. <<http://www.lhsc.on.ca/nursing/nppm-what.htm>>.
- The Ottawa Hospital. 2004. "Nursing Professional Practice." Retrieved May 3, 2005. <<http://www.ottawahospital.on.ca/hp/dept/nursing/npp/index-e.asp>>.
- University Health Network. 2004. "Professional Practice Model." Retrieved May 3, 2005. <http://www.uhn.ca/programs/nursing/site/professional_practice>.