

Nurse Practitioners



Occupational Brief Title Codes:

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Work Classification Based Related

D.O.T. Occupations:

- Nurse Anesthetists
- Nurse-Midwives
- Nursing Instructors
- Psychiatric Aide Instructors
- School Nurses

Interests Based Related

G.O.E. Occupations:

- Licensed Practical Nurses
- Occupational Health Nursing
- Physician Assistants
- Quality Assurance Coordinators
- Transplant Coordinators

Skills Based Related

O*NET Occupations:

- Chiropractors
- Medical Assistants
- Podiatrists
- Psychiatric Aides
- Surgeons

Noteworthy Quote:

“Nurse practitioners are at the forefront of providing affordable healthcare. Over the last decade, we have gained the respect of other healthcare professionals, and have earned greater independence in our practice. Our experience, knowledge, and expertise qualifies us to perform many of the duties carried out by physicians, but at a reduced cost. We are able to help people who may not have otherwise been able to afford medical treatment.”

Emmi Detreiss
Nurse Practitioner
Milwaukee, Wisconsin

Nurse practitioners (‘nurse prac’ti-tion-ers) are registered nurses with an advanced education and clinical expertise that qualify them to diagnose and treat common illnesses and injuries. They also educate patients in health promotion, wellness, and health maintenance.

Health care in the United States is complex and ever-changing. The ever-expanding scope of knowledge and new technologies in health care require professionals and clinicians with special skills. Grouped under the umbrella term of Advanced Practice Nurses are four health-care specialists: nurse practitioner, certified registered nurse anesthetist, clinical nurse specialist, and certified nurse-midwife.

Nurse practitioners (NPs) are registered nurses (RNs) with an advanced education that qualifies them to perform many duties formerly carried out by a physician. Their advanced training and clinical expertise allows them to assume some independent responsibility in their work. They assess the needs of patients and make decisions on treatments. Although some NPs work independently, many are still members of health care teams consisting of physicians, other nurses, therapists, and health care technicians. Many nurse practitioners work in a specialty such as adult, family, pediatric, women’s health, or geriatric health care.

Work Performed

Working in collaboration with a physician, who may or may not be present, nurse practitioners perform many of the routine tasks physicians do. They conduct physical examinations, take medical histories, and diagnose and treat common illnesses and injuries. They order and interpret lab tests and X rays, and counsel



Nurse practitioners are qualified to diagnose and treat common illnesses and injuries.

Photo by CGP Staff

and educate patients. In forty-nine states nurse practitioners are allowed some form of authority to prescribe medicines. Some states require a physician's signature for the prescription to be valid.

Nurse practitioners see patients with common illnesses such as colds, flu, and sore throats, and give instructions on treatment. They may also give emergency care for injuries, such as stitching minor cuts. They may oversee the treatment of people with a chronic illness such as high blood pressure or diabetes. Nurse practitioners also see patients who are seriously ill or who have difficult medical conditions. They consult with physicians or other medical specialists about these cases, or they may refer the patient to a physician or specialist. State laws vary on the extent of physician consultation required.

When they first see a patient, nurse practitioners take a health history. They gather facts on the physical and mental status of patients and their families and note them on the patient's medical record. They examine the patient thoroughly and ask the patient questions about any symptoms or conditions he or she may have. They may order X rays, diagnostic procedures, or lab work such as routine urine or blood tests. They assess the results. They may confer with physicians and other specialists on the course of care and treatment.

Nurse practitioners set up plans for treatment and instruct the patient on medication and other measures. In the course of treatment, they observe and record the patient's condition and reactions to drugs, treatments, and incidents.

Nurse practitioners give patients advice on how to prevent or treat illness. They may suggest nutrition, exercise, stress management, or other measures. They may recommend other health services such as physical therapy, home health care, or rehabilitation services. They may arrange referrals, consultations, or therapeutic services.

Some other health maintenance activities offered by nurse practitioners are vaccination clinics and diagnostic screenings for disorders such as high blood pressure and diabetes.

Nurse practitioners often develop and maintain a relationship with patients that enables them to offer a complete range of care. Besides hands-on physical care, they offer educational, social, and emotional counseling. They may suggest lifestyle changes that could reduce stress or eliminate other damaging factors (such as smoking) affecting the patients or their families.

Nurse practitioners often work with a specialist such as a pediatrician or obstetrician. In a pediatric clinic or office nurse practitioners care for children from infancy through adolescence. They give physical exams, and examine and treat children to both diagnose and prevent illness. They may give advice on nutrition and diet and counsel parents

on the physical and emotional growth and development of their children. Obstetrical nurse practitioners care for women during normal pregnancy, labor, and delivery.

Nurse practitioners who work in geriatric settings help elderly patients remain active and in good health during their later years. These nurses may counsel the terminally ill and their families to help them through the death of a patient.

Nurse practitioners can deliver many of the services offered by primary care physicians. They give the patients immediate attention and health care, expert advice, coordinated care, and follow-up counseling.

Working Conditions

The working conditions of nurse practitioners vary. They may work in almost any place that offers health care, from a rural outpatient clinic to a private health office. Most work in comfortable settings.

Nurse practitioners in rural locations spend time on the road and in the homes of patients who cannot come to the office. In remote or medically underserved regions, the quarters and equipment of a clinic may be very basic.

Nurses may care for persons with an infectious disease such as hepatitis or AIDS. In the care of these patients they must follow strict guidelines to avoid contracting the disease or passing it on to others.

The work can be physically strenuous. Nurse practitioners spend much of their time standing or walking, although they do have times when they sit to do record keeping, counseling, patient education, or consultations.

Hours and Earnings

Like other professionals, nurse practitioners do not work an exact number of hours a week. Their working hours depend on where they practice, the needs of their patients, and their professional commitments.

Most nurse practitioners work days or evenings. Many make house calls. Others may have on-call hours when they see their patients. They also devote time to activities in community health programs.

According to a survey from Nurse Practitioner Central, in 2001, nurse practitioners earned an average of \$64,593 a year. Yearly salaries for nurse practitioners ranged from a low of \$35,000 to a high of \$150,000. The majority earned between \$60-\$70,000 a year.

In most places nurse practitioners receive paid vacations, health insurance, and paid time off for continuing education. They may receive tuition waivers for study.

Education and Training

Nurse practitioners must first be registered nurses. There are three kinds of programs to become an RN. Community colleges offer a two-year associate degree

program. Hospital schools of nursing offer a two-and-a-half or three-year diploma program. Colleges and universities offer a four- or five-year bachelor's degree program. Entrance requirements for nursing programs vary. High school students should take college preparatory courses.

Nursing students combine the theory and practice of nursing with studies in behavioral, biological, and physical sciences. Courses include nutrition, psychology, anatomy, and microbiology. In addition, they receive on-the-job training, or clinical practice, in patient care in various settings, such as health agencies, clinics, nursing homes, and hospitals.

Graduates of a nursing program do not become registered nurses until they take and pass a state licensing examination. Those who pass may practice nursing in that state and use the initials RN (Registered Nurse) after their name. Only registered nurses may enter a continuing education or graduate program of study to become nurse practitioners. There are over 50 graduate degree programs for nurse practitioners in the United States. For most advanced degree programs, entrants must have a Bachelor of Science in Nursing.

Training programs for nurse practitioners vary widely and may last from nine months to two years. RNs with a bachelor's degree in nursing often complete a year-and-a-half to two-years of graduate study to earn a master's degree in nursing. A master's degree is increasingly necessary for this work, especially for certification. In graduate programs, nurses take advanced clinical, education, and research courses. This study gives them advanced knowledge and skills in diagnostic and health assessment, and clinical management. This background enables them to serve as nurse specialists.

Licensing and Certification

All states and the District of Columbia require nurses to be licensed. Graduates of state-approved schools of nursing are eligible to take state licensing tests. Nurses may be licensed in more than one state, either by examination or endorsement of a license issued by another state. Nurses must renew their licenses periodically, and some states require continuing education as a condition of renewal.

Registered nurses may get certification or designation as nurse practitioners from a state board of nursing or from a national certifying body. The American Nurses Association, the American Academy of Nurse Practitioners, the National Association of Pediatric Nurse Associates and Practitioners, and the National Certification Corporation (Women's Health and Neonatal) offer certification. National certification is desirable but may not be required for nurse practitioner positions. Some states, however,

require nurse practitioners to be certified before they can practice.

Personal Qualifications

Since much of their work consists of interactions with people, good communications skills are vital. Nurse practitioners should be caring and sympathetic. They should enjoy working with people and should have an interest in their health concerns.

Nurse practitioners must be sensitive and discreet in questioning patients. At the same time they must get the information they need to give the best possible nursing care. Nurse practitioners should be able to gather facts, to reason, and to make informed decisions.

Intelligence, initiative, and leadership are important for nurse practitioners. They must have good judgment in emergencies and patience at all times. They must be willing to take responsibility and should be able to direct others. At the same time, they should be willing to consult a physician or refer a client to a specialist if necessary.

Occupations can be adapted for workers with disabilities. Persons should contact their school or employment counselors, their state office of vocational rehabilitation, or their state department of labor to explore fully their individual needs and requirements as well as the requirements of the occupation.

Where Employed

Nurse practitioners work in many settings. They work in hospitals, clinics, health maintenance organizations, physicians' offices, public health agencies, nursing homes, hospices, prisons, and industry. They also work in schools, colleges, mental health centers, home health agencies, crisis intervention centers, and psychiatric hospitals. Others work for the federal government in veterans' hospitals or in the Armed Forces.

In states that allow them autonomy (authority to practice independently of a physician, in writing prescriptions) nurse practitioners may be self-employed or have an office with one or more partners. Those practicing in rural areas have the most autonomy.

Employment Outlook

The employment outlook for these professionals is good. Technological advances in patient care, which allow treatment of a greater number of medical problems, will spur the demand for nurse practitioners. Increasing numbers of older people will be in need of the services of nursing professionals. Emphasis on preventive care and the rehabilitation of persons surviving severe trauma will also create a need for nurses.

The role of nurse practitioners is expanding along with the shifting emphasis to primary health care, which helps

people stay healthy or get better. Legislation expanding the scope of independent practice for nurse practitioners has eased some restrictions. RNs now feel more encouraged to undertake graduate study to become nurse practitioners. In August 1997 a provision contained in spending bills approved by Congress allowed nurse practitioners and clinical nurse specialists to be paid directly by Medicare.

However, some remaining limitations on the scope of practice, and continued resistance to their role as independent practitioners by other health professionals, may discourage nurses from becoming nurse practitioners. Under the new Medicare provision law, which took effect in January 1998, nurse practitioners may be reimbursed by Medicare, but at a rate of 85 percent of the physician's fee schedule. Some insurance companies still will not pay nurse practitioners directly without prior approval. This lack of autonomy and lack of reimbursement may make it difficult for nurse practitioners to set up private practices.

Entry Methods

Nurse practitioner students can often get leads on nurse practitioner positions from the placement office of the school of nursing or the clinical setting where they are studying. They can also look for job listings in nursing journals and newspapers. State employment offices may list openings for nurse practitioners. Recruiting firms may place nurse practitioners.

Nurse practitioners may apply at hospitals, nursing homes, health clinics, and other health care centers. Any regional Office of Personnel Management has information about work with the federal government.

Advancement

Prospects for advancement are excellent, especially for nurse practitioners with academic preparation and experience. They may ask for more responsibility and higher pay, or they may transfer to a larger health care center to advance in rank and earnings. Those with a master's degree may direct a nursing staff in a hospital, clinic, or health agency. They may open their own office or clinic. They may become specialists in a specific clinical field, teachers of nurse practitioners, supervisors, or researchers. Nurse practitioners who earn a doctorate may become teachers, administrators in colleges or universities, service agency consultants, or policymakers in government and professional organizations.

For Further Research

American Academy of Nurse Practitioners, Capitol Station, LBJ Building, P.O. Box 12846, Austin, TX 78711.

Web site: <http://www.aanp.org>

Directory of NP Programs. Free online.

What is a Nurse Practitioner? Free online.

American Nursing Association, 600 Maryland Avenue, S.W., Suite 100 West, Washington, DC 20024. Web site: <http://nursingworld.org>

Information on a Career in Nursing. Free online.

Atheneum Press, Norregade 6, Copenhagen, Denmark, DK-1165.

Unforgettable Faces: Through the Eyes of a Nurse Practitioner. Elizabeth D. Tate and Michael R. Pranzatelli. 461 pages. \$34.00.

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