

EDITORIAL

Why become a Nurse Practitioner

Martha Velasco Whetsell

Nurse practitioners (NP) are healthcare professionals educated and trained to provide health promotion and maintenance through the diagnosis and treatment of acute illness and chronic conditions. According to the International Council of Nurses, an advanced practice registered nurse 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 s/he is credentialed to practice.

NPs complete advanced education (a minimum of a master’s degree) beyond basic education and licensing required of all registered nurses. The advanced education includes advanced physical assessment, diagnosis, interpretation of diagnostic tests, management of common medical conditions, including chronic illnesses and pharmacological therapies. NPs serve as primary care providers and they perform a broad range of healthcare services.

Health care services provided by NPs frequently overlap with services provided by physicians. NPs maintain close working relationships with physicians. Some jurisdictions require written collaborative agreements between NPs and physicians. Collaborative agreements detail the level of oversight provided by the collaborating physician. Physician oversight may include practice protocols, patient referrals and consultations, and medical record reviews. Collaborative agreements vary between states.

Main NP duties and responsibilities include the following:

- Obtaining medical histories and conducting physical examinations.
- Ordering, performing and interpreting diagnostic studies (e.g., lab tests, x-rays, EKGs).
- Counseling and educating patients on health behaviours, self-care skills and treatment options.
- Diagnosing and treating acute illnesses, infections and injuries.
- Diagnosing, treating, and monitoring chronic diseases (e.g., diabetes, high blood pressure).
- Prescribing medications.
- Prescribing physical therapy and other rehabilitation treatments.
- Providing prenatal care and family planning services.
- Providing well-child care, including screening and immunizations.
- Providing health maintenance care for adults, including annual physicals.

Many NPs work in speciality areas of healthcare. Some choose to obtain expert certification in the primary care of adults, children, families and individuals with Psychiatric- mental health diagnoses, as well as specialization in the acute care of adults. Additionally, some NPs focus specifically on obstetrics and gynecology and they obtain expert certification in Women’s Health and midwifery. In addition to providing health care services, NPs conduct

research and work to increase nursing knowledge.

The institutions in which NPs work include the following:

- Community clinics and health centers.
- Health departments.
- Health maintenance organizations (HMOs).
- Home health care agencies.
- Hospitals and hospital clinics and outpatient departments.
- Hospice centers.
- Private offices.
- Skilled nursing facilities.
- Schools.
- Veterans Administration facilities.

NPs rely upon the nursing model of patient and family-centered care that focuses on the effects of illness on the lives of the patients and their families. NPs concentrate on illness prevention, wellness promotion and patient education when planning individualized care with their patients. Providing healthcare education and information and empowering patients to participate in decisions concerning their own health care are central to NP practice.

Studies suggest that NPs provide high-quality, cost-effective individualized care that is comparable to the health care provided by physicians.