Definition of primary health care nursing

APNA's definition of primary health care nursing has a number of components, outlined below.

What is 'health'?

Primary health care nurses adopt the definition of health in the Declaration of Alma-Ata – that "health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity"[1].

They reaffirm health as a human right and see economic and social development as a prerequisite to the attainment of health for all. They see the promotion and protection of health, including the reduction of social exclusion and disparities in health, as having positive effects on economic and social development and on world peace.[1]

Primary health care nurses see the participation of people as a group or individually in planning and implementing their health care as a human right and duty[1]. One way of expressing this is through a phrase that originated in the disability movement – 'Nothing about me without me'[2]. Primary health care nurses acknowledge the dignity, culture, values, beliefs and rights of individuals/groups.[3]

What is the scope of practice?

Primary health care nurses are enrolled nurses, registered nurses and nurse practitioners eligible for registration by the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency whose competence, as specified by the registering authority's license to practice, educational preparation, relevant legislation, standards and codes[3] is specific to (though not exclusive to) the primary health care context.

Like nurses in other settings, primary health care nurses have professional, legal and ethical responsibilities which require demonstration of a satisfactory knowledge base, accountability for practice, functioning in accordance with legislation affecting nursing and health care, and the protection of individual and group rights.

What is primary health care?

Primary health care is the first level of contact that individuals, families and communities have with the health care system. In Australia, this:
- incorporates personal care with health promotion, the prevention of illness and community development

- includes the interconnecting principles of equity, access, empowerment, community self-determination and inter-sectoral collaboration
- encompasses an understanding of the social, economic, cultural and political determinants of health. [4]

Grounded in their scope of practice, nurses provide socially appropriate, universally accessible, scientifically sound, first level care. They work independently and interdependently in teams to:

- give priority to those most in need and addresses health inequalities
- maximise community and individual self-reliance, participation and control
- ensure collaboration and partnership with other sectors to promote public health. [adapted from [5]]

In what settings do primary health care nurses work?

Primary health care nurses work in a range of settings, each sharing the characteristic that they are a part of the first level of contact with the health system.

In Australia, those settings can include:

- community settings – including the community controlled health services, the 'community health' sector and roles within social service settings
- general practice
- domiciliary settings – in the home, including residential aged care, custodial/detention settings, boarding houses and outreach to homeless people
- educational settings – including preschool, primary and secondary school, vocational and tertiary education settings
- occupational settings – occupational health and safety and workplace nursing
- informal and unstructured settings – including ad hoc and 'Good Samaritan' roles in daily life, like sports settings and community groups.

What are the roles of a primary health care nurse?

A model of the roles of nurses is that their work may cover:

- health promotion
- illness prevention
- midwifery, antenatal and postnatal care
- treatment and care of sick people
- rehabilitation and palliation
- community development
- population and public health
- education and research
- policy development and advocacy. [adapted from [5]]

Recent research within the Australian general practice setting describes the following roles of primary health care nurses; patient carer, organiser, quality controller and improvement agent, problem solver, educator, and agent of connectivity. [adapted from 6]

The relevant importance of these roles will depend on both the nursing context and the accountabilities and responsibilities of the nursing position.

References

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About APNA

Nurses in primary health care contribute to a healthy Australia through innovative, informed and dynamic care.

APNA champions the role of primary health care nurses; to advance professional recognition, ensure workforce sustainability, nurture leadership in health, and optimise the role of nurses in patient-centred care.

APNA is bold, vibrant and future-focused. We reflect the views of our membership and the broader profession by bringing together nurses from across primary health care to represent, advocate, promote and celebrate the achievements of nurses in primary health care.

Our vision is a healthy Australia through best practice primary health care nursing.

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