

Nursing Roles in General Practice

Healthy Practices

APNA has produced a suite of resources to help general practices employ nurses and optimise their role in the general practice setting. Fulfilling these aims will help build Healthy Practices that deliver positive outcomes for their communities through nursing skills and expertise.

In the past 20 years, the number of nurses working in general practice has increased to over 10,500. More than 60 per cent of general practices now employ at least one nurse.¹

Before you advertise for a nurse, it is important to consider the:

- Benefits of employing a nurse to your practice
- Roles you would like a nurse to undertake at your practice
- Skills and qualifications a nurse is required to have in those roles
- Risks associated with employing a nurse that must be managed.

A benefit assessment tool has been provided in this kit to assist you to determine the benefits for your practice.

Six core roles of the general practice nurse

Researchers have identified six core roles of the general practice nurse²:

1. **Patient carer:** clinical activities and relationships with patients (accounts for approximately 43 per cent of a nurse's time)
2. **Organiser:** organisational aspects of patient care (e.g. patient recall and reminder systems, brokering referrals to community services, and undertaking patient health assessments) and systems supporting patient care (e.g. triaging patients, maintaining treatment room stock, sterilising instruments, managing contaminated waste, and systems for collecting patient measurements)
3. **Quality controller:** quality and risk activities, such as infection control, the safe disposal of sharps, and contributing to practice accreditation
4. **Problem solver:** solving problems that arise on a day-to-day basis, such as managing high patient demand on busy

days, supporting receptionists' decision-making, solving issues with practice software systems and sourcing information such as referral options

5. **Educator:** educating practice staff, including GPs (e.g. about wound care, accreditation standards, and MBS items), and distributing information
6. **Agent of connectivity:** between different disciplines within the practice, patients and clinicians, administrative staff and GPs, and community and hospital settings.

**Which of these core roles are most relevant to your practice?
How can these be built into a position description for a nursing role?**

Nursing roles at your general practice

Employing a nurse can bring many benefits to your practice, such as sharing the clinical workload, introducing new services for patients, better managing of patient recall and reminder systems, and implementing better systems to maintain and improve the quality of care.

General practice nurses provide patient care across the life spectrum. Most general practice nurses undertake a variety of roles, but some also specialise. For example, they may be diabetes nurse educators or maternal and child health nurses.

Before employing a nurse, you need to carefully consider the roles you wish a nurse to undertake at your practice. These can be developed into a position description to recruit the right person for the position. It is important to be clear about what a nursing position will look like, so you can recruit a nurse with the right knowledge, skills and attitude to perform the job

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safely and competently. Factors such as practice and GP clinical specialties, the size of the practice, patient demographics, the physical layout of the practice and patient demand for services can help you determine the type of roles a nurse could undertake at your practice. If you already have a nurse in mind to employ, their skills and competencies could also help determine their role within the practice.

To determine suitable roles, consider:

- How the six core roles of the general practice nurse could apply to your practice
- How a nurse could provide care to your practice's patient demographics and improve quality of care. For example, if your practice sees a lot of young families your nurse may be required to provide immunisation to children, perinatal care to mothers, and help parents manage lifestyle risk factors for chronic illness, such as physical inactivity and poor diet
- Roles and models of care and how to develop these into a position description for funding that may be available for nursing roles.

A nurse can help you to proactively target patients with particular needs.

Analysing patient demographics to determine nursing roles

There are many patient carer roles a nurse in general practice can undertake, depending on their competencies. These include, but are not limited to, lifestyle education, aged care, wound management, immunisation, women's health, men's health, infection control, chronic disease management (such as diabetes, cardiovascular, cancer, and respiratory care), chronic disease screening (such as cancer screening, diabetes risk evaluations, and obesity management), mental health, maternal and child health, health promotion, population health, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health, and acute care (such as patient triage and minor procedures).

A good way to determine whether the 'patient carer' nurse roles will help your practice is to look at the characteristics of your patients. A nurse can help you to proactively target

patients with particular needs. For example, if you have a lot of patients that are overweight or obese, a healthy lifestyle clinic led by a nurse could be beneficial. If you have a number of patients 75 years of age or older, the nurse role could be recalling these patients to facilitate MBS-funded 75+ health assessments.

Ways to analyse patient demographics include:

- Using tools available in your clinical management software
- Speaking to a representative at your Primary Health Network or other agencies that specialise in data extraction to see what support and IT tools are available to analyse patient data.

Scope of practice and position descriptions

Although you may know what roles you would like a nurse to undertake at your practice, you need to ensure the nurse you employ has the skills, knowledge, and attitude to undertake those roles, or that you are willing to help the nurse acquire these. All nurses have a professional, legal and ethical responsibility to operate within their scope of practice. Therefore, nurses should not be asked by their employer or another clinician to undertake clinical or other duties outside their scope of practice.

When recruiting a nurse, you need to be clear about what you would like the nurse to do and be satisfied a nurse can safely and competently undertake those activities. You are, however, encouraged to optimise a nurse's scope of practice to maximise the benefit from a nurse's skill and expertise. It is also recommended that you discuss with the nurse how they would like to develop their skills and further their ongoing professional development.

All staff within general practice should have a position description that clearly outlines their roles and responsibilities and an employment contract with the conditions of employment. Position descriptions help to establish clear boundaries of practice and lines of accountability, and assists with performance management and review processes. It is important that the position description is tailored specifically to your practice and the nurse's roles and responsibilities within the practice.

Reference:

¹ AML Alliance National Workforce Survey 2012

² Phillips, C. et al. 2009. 'Enhancing care, improving quality: the six roles of the general practice nurse'. Medical Journal of Australia. 191:92-97. Services, Practice nurse items, MBS items 10983, 10984, 10986, 10987, 10997 and 16400: <https://www.medicareaustralia.gov.au/provider/business/education/files/2584-practice-nurse-items-qrg.pdf>

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