Roles of the Nurse Practitioner

Abby Smith

Auburn University/Auburn Montgomery
Abstract

Advanced practice nursing has many roles in health care today, with one in particular being the role of the nurse practitioner. Nurse practitioners provide cost effective, patient centered care through various roles in different settings and specializations. Nurse practitioners may specialize in areas including but not limited to family, adult, pediatrics, and women’s health. State boards of nursing regulate the scope of practice for nurse practitioners and regulations are changing daily. As health care is changing, nurse practitioners will help provide the care needed for both acute and chronic health conditions for the American population.
Introduction

Since the 1960s, physicians have been working with nurse practitioners (NPs) (Bachus, 1995). Originally thought to be physician extenders, NPs have proven to provide comprehensive care to patients (Bachus, 1995). Barnason and Morris (2011) add that NPs do not substitute care provided by physicians; however, they do have adequate knowledge allowing them to provide high quality health care to patients. In recent years, there have been shortages of primary care providers, causing it to be hard for patients to have access to care when they need it (Liu and D’Aunno, 2012). As health care continues to change, more Americans may have health insurance, causing the demand for health care providers to rise (Liu and D’Aunno, 2012). To achieve meeting the demands of patients, NPs can be utilized to provide high quality and cost effective care to patients. Nurse practitioners are able to order tests and lab work, diagnose and treat chronic and acute conditions, prescribe medications, and counsel and educate patients (American Academy of Nurse Practitioners, 2012). Nurse practitioners may specialize in specific areas including acute care, family, adult, gerontology, neonatal, pediatrics, oncology, womens’s, and psychiatric health, as well as practicing in a variety of settings such as community, physician’s offices, and hospitals among others. Ultimately, NPs provide quality health care and improve clinical outcomes by focusing on health promotion, education and counseling, and disease prevention (AANP, 2012).

Regulation and Scope of Practice

Scope of practice establishes what patient can and cannot be seen, who the NP can treat, and the circumstance in which care may be provided (Medscape, 2007). State law governs and regulates the NP on requirements for licensure, scope of practice,
requirement of supervision or collaboration, prescriptive authority, basis for the nonrenewal, revocation, and suspension of license, reimbursement by indemnity insurers, reimbursement under Medicaid, requirements of educational programs, and practice standards (Jones and Bartlett Publishers, n.d.) Although the state regulates the scope of practice, typically the scope of practice includes diagnosis and treatment, history and physical examination, prescribing medications, ordering and interpreting diagnostic tests, counseling, educating, performing invasive and noninvasive tests, and referrals (McLaughlin, 2007). Nurse Practice Acts for states have provisions that allow NPs to perform specific services outlined under the scope of practice (McLaughlin, 2007).

Each state has specific regulations that are constantly evolving. In twenty-seven states NPs are required to practice in collaboration with a physician, while eleven states allow NPs to practice independently (Christian, Dower, & O’Neil, 2007). Every state allows NPs to prescribe medications; however, not all states will allow NPs to prescribe controlled substances. Twenty states allow NPs to order diagnostic tests, thirty-three states give NPs referral privileges, and forty-four allow NPs to diagnose patients (Christian, Dower, & O’Neil, 2007). National certification for NP licensure is required by forty-two states and a master’s degree is required by over half of the states. Quality of care, access to care, and health care costs can all be negatively affected by preventing NPs from practicing to their full competence (Christian, Dower, & O’Neil, 2007). Nurse practitioners’ ability to practice can be hindered by practice models that are outdated, reimbursement mechanisms, scope of practice laws, and malpractice insurance policies. By the states differing in their regulations, it can be confusing and also hinder the public’s access to certain types of care they may need (Christian, Dower, & O’Neil,
For instance, in Alabama, NPs are not allowed to prescribe controlled substances, which could be devastating for someone who requires this type of medication. By one day having a uniform scope of practice where all states agree, there could be less confusion and all NPs may be able to practice everything learned in school.

**Roles of the Nurse Practitioner**

Nurse practitioners are permitted to practice in any setting such as urgent care settings, intensive care units, acute care setting, and subacute care (McLaughlin, 2007). The roles include evidenced and research-based practice, diagnostic reasoning in order to develop the plan of care, and patient care management (McLaughlin, 2007). Nurse practitioners can specialize in areas of practice, which include but are not limited to family, adult, pediatrics, and women’s health. For each of these areas, the roles could differ as well as settings.

**Family Nurse Practitioner (FNP)**

The FNP provides health care for people of all ages, showing family-centered care (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2002). They typically practice in ambulatory care settings. Some roles and responsibilities of the FNP include obtaining a health history in all phases of the life cycle of the patient, performing physical exams including behavioral and developmental screenings for patients of every age, assessing whether there is a family correlation in the patient illness, men’s and women’s reproductive health, history of violence and substance abuse, and distinguishing psychosocial and health risk factors of patients in all stages of life (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2002). Family nurse practitioners also evaluate patient’s mental health status, performs functional assessments of families, identifies family health
needs and plans appropriate interventions that promote health and well-being, and
determines what are normal and abnormal changes with aging. Upon examination, the
FNP identifies the symptoms of acute and chronic illness across the lifespan, orders
appropriate diagnostic tests, analyzes the data collected, uses critical thinking to
determine differential diagnoses, and then determines the ultimate health diagnosis (U.S.
Department of Health and Human Services, 2002). Upon diagnosing the patient, the FNP
comes up with an appropriate treatment regimen, ensuring health promotion and disease
prevention are key interventions. The FNP treats illnesses from acute to chronic,
prescribes medications while ensuring that the medications prescribed fit the population
such as children, pregnant women, and older adults, assists families with lifestyle
adaptations, coping mechanisms, and performs minor procedures that may be needed
(U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2002). It is also important that life
transitions from family members health, retirement are addressed from the provider, as
well as incorporates family theories in order to individualize care for families and
individuals. The FNP patient relationship is key to facilitate family decision making and
also assisting patients with their specific family needs, while always showing
commitment to caring for the entire family (U.S. Department of Health and Human
Services, 2002). Family nurse practitioners are unique and vital care givers because they
are able to see the whole family and incorporate care appropriate for everyone.

**Adult Nurse Practitioner**

Like the FNP, the adult NP provides direct health care services and focuses on
health promotion, disease prevention, and treatment plans focusing on adolescents and
adults (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2002). Obtaining health
histories, performing system and symptom physical exams, assessing patients for home, occupational, and recreational exposures affecting health, and evaluating mental health, violence, and substance abuse are all tasks the adult NP provides for patients. The adult NP also evaluates the functional status of the patient, social relationships, and the ability to work and return to work after a sickness (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2002). Life changes that impact a person’s life such as marriage, divorce, death, getting employed, and retiring are taken into consideration by the adult NP. Prescription and over the counter medications and their effects in someone with multiple health problems are analyzed by the adult NP to ensure there are no adverse reactions for the patient (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2002). The adult NP determines the diagnosis of the patient by identifying signs and symptoms and developing appropriate differential diagnoses, putting into play the impact of family, career, relationships, parenting, and finances on their individual health. In planning and implementing treatment, the adult NP focuses on age appropriate health promotion while incorporating prevention for work-related issues and evidenced based practice to promote positive health (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2002). A final role the adult NP covers is helping adults in their decision-making regarding advanced directives, durable power of attorney, and transitions in various healthcare settings (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2002). Adult nurse practitioners can be beneficial for patients, especially in the many changes that happen in life as an adult.

**Pediatric Nurse Practitioner**

Pediatric nurse practitioners are vital caregivers for children and to help parents know whether their child is healthy and on target with their development. Pediatric NPs
are unique in that they analyze different factors that could affect the development and growth of a child like genetics, parenting styles, cultural and family influences, prenatal factors, environmental factors, and health status (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2002). Evidence of child neglect and abuse is also something the pediatric NP must evaluate as well as analyzing how the family works and the influence a family can play on a child. Health risks such as immunization status, family history, developmental level, nutritional status, social support, environmental factors, and risk-taking behavior are assessed (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2002). It is also important for the pediatric NP to determine the family and patient’s knowledge of health behaviors such as physical activity, substance use, eating disorders, immunizations, mental health, and overall access to care (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2002). Without proper knowledge of these common issues, the child’s health could be placed in jeopardy. The pediatric NP develops the diagnosis and treatment for the patient in a similar manner to the above NPs. Some tasks specific to pediatric NPs include calling on child protective services for children at risk, prescribing medications with proper dosing for children, planning transition into adulthood and proper health care, and assisting parents in coping with various development behaviors (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2002). Communication is also important because the NP must communicate in a way that reaches not only the parent, but the child as well. Pediatric NPs are beneficial for parents and children and allow them to see how various factors play into a child’s growth and development.
Women’s Health NPs use evidenced based practice to guide their practice in promoting health and well being to women. In obtaining a health history, the women’s health NP is careful to note obstetric and gynecological history, contraception, sexually transmitted infections, menopause related issues, depression, high-risk pregnancies, pregnancy related complications, disease risk factors specific to women, issues dealing with sexuality, reproductive needs, and genetic risks (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2002). In diagnosing, the women’s health NP uses the same steps as other NPs and also is able to perform pap tests, sexually transmitted infection tests, and post coital tests. The NP may also order and interpret testing including mammograms, ultrasound, endometrial biopsies, fetal assessment tests, and age appropriate screenings (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2002). Emphasis in diagnosing is placed on gynecologic and reproductive health ranging from pregnancy to menopause. Women’s health NPs treat patients with health promotion and disease prevention to women across their lives, providing prenatal and postnatal care, parenting and lactation advice, family planning management, formulating a plan of care for abusive relationships, treating men with some reproductive problems, and providing appropriate medications for women (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2002). Women’s health NPs provide vital services to women ranging from primary care to specific women’s health needs.

Whether it is a family, adult, pediatric, or women’s health NP, one is sure to find a health care provider to fit their personal needs. There are also NPs specializing in oncology, neonates, and geriatrics among others. Nurse practitioners have the ability to carry out most roles in health care.
Conclusion

To conclude, NPs are able to fill the roles of being a health care provider to all types of people. Nurse practitioners provide patient centered, cost-effective, high-quality health care to patients offering a solution to the shortage of primary care providers in America (AANP, 2012). The scope of practice for NPs is constantly evolving, allowing NPs to practice to their full potential in managing acute and chronic conditions. As health care changes, more NPs will be utilized to treat patients of all ages and conditions.
References


