



## Nurse Practitioners in Acute Care: Make A Commitment to Excellence!

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There perhaps has never been a more exciting time for nurse practitioners (NPs) working in acute care settings. NPs are shaping the literature and informing the evidence-based strategies clinicians use every day to inform best clinical practice and standards of care. These NPs are working tirelessly in the making of major impacts in the delivery of optimal patient outcomes. As NPs have met these demands, they have done so in a national health care system in which caring for the acutely ill patient population has becoming increasingly more challenging. As care structures and payor dynamics have shifted over the past several decades, acute care NPs are having to care for patients who are living longer, presenting with multiple complex comorbidities, are prone to clinical vulnerability and instability, and often rely on technology-dependent interventions.

There is no refuting that the role of NPs has advanced by lightyears since the time Loretta Ford laid the bedrock for the NP profession at the University of Colorado in 1965. But nationwide, the acute care NP profession is facing an issue that is often difficult to discuss but must be addressed. Too many NPs working in acute care are lacking the education and board certification necessary to reflect competency in the care of acutely ill persons.

NP colleagues educated and certified in primary care are taking on responsibilities in acute care practice that threaten to push the boundaries of their professional scope. Although these NPs have strong clinical knowledge in disease prevention and the management of acute and chronic illnesses in stable patients, they lack the essential educational foundation requisite in caring for the highly acute and unstable individuals seen in hospitals and acute care settings in the current US health care landscape.

This presents a perplexing conundrum in which NPs might be making clinical decisions that they aren't prepared to make. These primary care NPs are also devoid of the credential that informs the public that they have met the rigorous educational and clinical preparation standards of pediatric acute (PNP-AC), acute care (ACNP), and adult-gerontology acute care (AGACNP) NPs. This mismatch in

the primary care NP's education and certification can complicate malpractice issues and can even lead to licensure concerns that can threaten the NP's career. Education and certification are the only mechanisms primary care NPs can use to obtain the knowledge, skill, and credential(s) needed to demonstrate nationally standardized competency in treating the highly acute conditions of patients cared for in high-acuity settings across the United States.

The NP profession has acknowledged this and published a major national resource to help guide policies related to the licensure, accreditation, certification, and education (LACE) of NPs. The Advanced Practice Registered Nurse Consensus Model<sup>1</sup> outlines the LACE concepts and should serve as the tool state boards of nursing use to define the roles and responsibilities of NPs based on their educational population and certification foci.

Nonetheless, NPs also must take professional responsibility for their practices. Just as a PNP-AC, ACNP, or AGACNP must earn a primary care education and national certification to demonstrate competency in managing patients in primary care settings, primary care-educated NPs must complete acute care education and national certification to demonstrate competency in managing patients in acute care.

NP faculties also have a responsibility to work closely with primary care-educated and certified NPs seeking to earn the graduate education and credential to match their acute care clinical practices. These NPs often present with a wealth of knowledge that should be appreciated. Their clinical education should be uniquely tailored to meet identified needs through a comprehensive and skillfully conducted gap analysis.<sup>2</sup>

In conclusion, working as an NP in acute care is truly a privilege and an honor. Nursing remains the nation's most trusted profession.<sup>3</sup> NPs have played an integral part in the evolution of the US health care system into its current complex state. The role of NPs will continue to expand to meet the stresses and strains of a progressively aging patient population with increasingly complex acuities. As NP roles grow and advance, those working in acute care must ensure

their education and certification is reflective of what is necessary to meet their professional responsibilities and public accountability.

### DECLARATION OF COMPETING INTEREST

In compliance with standard ethical guidelines, the author reports no relationships with business or industry that may pose a conflict of interest.

### References

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