Chapter 2: Advanced Practice Nursing Concept and Roles

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Introduction

Shifting demographics and changes in population health have resulted in changes in healthcare (Lee et al., 2020). The nursing profession has evolved to address health, societal, and person-centred care challenges (WHO, 2020). APN roles have been recognised as a means of improving access to care and quality of care and potentially decreasing healthcare costs (Maier et al., 2017). Advanced nursing practice refers to a field of nursing that extends and expands the boundaries of the scope of practice of nursing, contributes to nursing knowledge, and promotes the advancement of the profession. Moreover, APN refers to advanced nursing interventions that influence clinical healthcare outcomes for individuals, families, and diverse populations (WHO, 2020). Globally, and also in the Nordic and Baltic countries, the development of the role of APNs and their education has been supported by the International Council of Nurses' (ICN) definition of an APN. According to the ICN (2008; 2020) all APNs: (1) are practitioners of nursing; (2) provide safe and competent patient care; (3) have their foundation in nursing education; (4) have roles or levels of practice that require formal education beyond the preparation of registered nurses; (5) have roles or levels of practice with increased levels of competency and capability that are measurable, beyond that of a generalist registered nurse; (6) have acquired the ability to explain and apply the theoretical, empirical, ethical, legal, caregiving, and professional development required for APN; (7) have defined APN competencies and standards which are periodically reviewed for maintaining currency in practice, and are influenced by the global, social, political, economic, and technological milieu (ICN, 2020). APN roles do not stand apart from nursing. Rather, the nursing core is what distinguishes them from those of non-nursing providers (Tracy & O'Grady, 2019). This chapter gives a brief overview of key APN concepts and roles.

Keywords: advanced practice nursing, concept, roles

Key definitions

This chapter aims to define and contextualise APN roles globally and within the Nordic and Baltic regions. There is much variability in the use of APN roles globally. A more precise understanding of the roles in place across the globe, how they are used and the outcomes being assessed would support greater role harmonisation and inform global priorities for APN education, research and policy reform (Schumann et al., 2019; Ladd et al., 2020; Sastre-Fullana et al., 2020; WHO, 2020; Morin Galfout et al., 2025).

- **Advanced Nursing Practice (ANP):** Refers to a field of nursing that extends and expands the boundaries of nursing's scope of practice, contributes to nursing knowledge, and promotes the advancement of the profession. It is characterised by the integration and application of a broad range of theoretical and evidence-based knowledge (ICN, 2020). The umbrella term describes an advanced level of clinical nursing practice and expertise in addressing the health needs of individuals, families, groups, communities, and populations (Canadian Nursing Association, 2019).
- **Advanced Practice Nurse (APN):** Refers to a generalist or specialised nurse who has acquired, through postgraduate education (a minimum of a master's degree), the expert knowledge base, complex decision-making skills, and clinical competencies required for ANP. The role is shaped by the context in which the APN credentialed to practise (ICN, 2020).
- **Advanced Practice Nursing (APN):** Refers to a career pathway for registered nurses who are committed to continuing professional development and clinical supervision and who practise at an advanced level as independent, autonomous, and expert practitioners. APNs role requires the application of research evidence and the integration of knowledge and skills to provide high-quality care, improve patient outcomes, and support the implementation of evidence-based practice (ICN, 2020; Casey & Connor, 2022). APN promotes consistency in practice, improves patient outcomes, and contributes to more effective healthcare delivery (Tracy & O'Grady, 2019).
- **Clinical Nurse Specialist (CNS):** An APN who provides expert clinical advice and care based on established diagnoses in specialised clinical fields, while taking a systems approach to practising as a member of the healthcare team. CNSs function as expert clinicians within a speciality and are leaders in advancing nursing practice through teaching, mentoring, consulting, and ensuring that nursing practice is evidence-based and/or evidence-informed (ICN, 2020).
- **Nurse Practitioner (NP):** An APN who integrates clinical skills associated with nursing and medicine to assess, diagnose, and manage patients in primary healthcare (PHC) settings and acute care populations, as well as ongoing care for populations with chronic illness (ICN, 2020).

Current roles

According to the ICN (2020), the two most common APN roles are CNS and NP. Both roles have been identified in Nordic and Baltic countries; however, only the NP or CNS role exists in some countries, and the two roles can be mixed (Sulosaari et al., 2023). For both roles, the education requirements are the same; APNs are prepared through master 's-level academic studies and supervised practice to perform various complex tasks in patient care and the broader healthcare system (European Nursing Research Foundation, 2022). APNs have designated nursing roles that focus on providing care, illness prevention, and cures based on direct and indirect healthcare services at an advanced level, including rehabilitative care and chronic disease management. Their role is beyond the scope of practice of a generalist or specialised nurse. They can integrate research (evidence-based practice), education, leadership, and clinical management (ICN, 2020). Bryant-Lukosius (2004, 2008) has clarified the essential distinctions between the CNS and NP roles, finding that the CNS focuses more on indirect care and supporting clinical excellence with a systems approach, while the NP focuses more on direct patient care within diverse clinical settings. The ICN (2020) has defined the key characteristics of CNS and NP; these can be found in the following report, ICN Guidelines on Advanced Practice Nursing (2020).

Trends in Advanced Practice Nursing Roles and Policy

The position of APNs has evolved in many countries around the world in response to changing and more complex patient needs, inequitable access, and provider shortages (Maier & Aiken, 2016). Thus, the development of APN has faced external challenges from other disciplines, such as medicine, and internal challenges within the domain of nursing. However, APN roles are growing in many new areas (Poghosyan et al., 2022) and continue to answer the challenges of rapidly changing health care. Over the past several decades, research has shown that APNs-provided care is associated with positive patients outcomes and that these nurses add critical value across various healthcare settings (e.g., Swan et al., 2015; Aiken et al., 2021). Although APNs deliver high-quality care, enabling policies and supportive work environments are essential for effective practice (Poghosyan et al., 2022). A recent umbrella review found highly consistent evidence that APN, NP, and CNS care was equal or superior to the comparator (e.g., physicians) for 29 indicator categories across a wide range of clinical settings, patient populations, and acuity levels (Killpatrick et al., 2024).

There are current and future opportunities for developing APN into a new era of nursing. According to the ICN (2020), in order to support the future potential of CNSs and NPs, there is a need to continue to:

- Promote clarity of CNS and NP practice;
- Identify how these nurses contribute to the delivery of healthcare services;
- Guide the development of educational curricula specific to the CNS and NP;
- Support these nurses in establishing advanced practice (CNS or NP) roles and levels of practice;
- Offer guidance to employers, organisations, and healthcare systems implementing the CNS and NP;

- Promote appropriate governance in terms of policy, legislation, and credentialing. (ICN, 2020.)

The European Nursing Research Foundation (2022) recently published its recommendations for policymakers and nurse leaders.

Policymakers:

- Support APNs in establishing roles and advanced levels of practice, identifying and aligning guidelines for employers, organisations, and health systems implementing APN;
- Carry out more research into the opportunities of APN, its impact, and implementation strategies within countries;

Nurse leaders:

- Facilitate master's-level education;
- Intensively guide the development of educational programmes specific to APNs (including CNSs and NPs) and support all countries in developing this professional pathway;
- Promote transparency, increase recognition with regulation within country regulatory systems, and reduce variation;
- Demonstrate how APNs are leading and improving the quality of care. (European Nursing Research Foundation, 2022.)

WHO (2025) recently published its recommendations for policymakers and nurse leaders on the development of APN. WHO highlights a global trend to optimise nurses' contributions in advanced roles and explicitly links APN development to increasing access to high-quality care.

- APN needs to be listed as a national policy priority for 2026–2030.
- APN roles need to be aligned with evidence and international definitions.
- National APN legislation and regulation need to be developed or updated so APNs can practise to the full extent of their education and scope, with clear role definitions and titles, and the removal of unnecessary practice restrictions.
- APN education capacity needs to be strengthened through graduate-level programmes aligned with ICN/WHO competency frameworks, with attention to clinical training capacity and faculty preparation.
- APNs need to be integrated into priority service delivery models (e.g., primary care, chronic disease management, rural/underserved areas) as a planned response to workforce shortages and population health needs.
- APNs need to be embedded in leadership and policy roles by linking APN development to the broader strengthening of government chief nursing offices and structured leadership development initiatives.

Tools and Resources

Organisations and networks:

- ICN NP/APN network https://www.icn.ch/who-we-are/npapn-network
- NHS England https://www.hee.nhs.uk/our-work/advanced-clinical-

practice/advanced-clinical-practice-toolkit

- Canadian Nurses Association https://www.cna-aiic.ca/en/nursing/advanced-nursing-practice
- American Nurses Association https://www.nursingworld.org/practice-policy/workforce/what-is-nursing/aprn/
- NACNS https://nacns.org/
- AANP https://www.aanp.org/
- APRN Consensus Work Group & the National Council of State Boards of Nursing. APRN Advisory Committee Consensus Model for APRN Regulation https://www.bon.texas.gov/pdfs/forms_pdfs/applications_pdfs/aprn_p dfs/aprnmodel.pdf

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