

WHITE PAPER OF THE CONSORTIUM FOR QUALITY NURSE PRACTITIONER EDUCATION

American Academy of Nurse Practitioners Certification Program (AANPCP)
American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN)
American Nurses Credentialing Center (ANCC)
Association of Faculties of Pediatric Nurse Practitioners/ and
Associate Programs (AFPN/AP)
Nurse Practitioners in Women's Health Accreditation Council (NPWHAC)
National Certification Corporation for the Obstetrics, Gynecologic &
Neonatal Nursing Specialties (NCC)
National Organization of Nurse Practitioner Faculties (NONPF)
The National Certification Board of Pediatric Nurse Practitioners and Nurses
(NCBPNP/N)

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Preamble

Recognizing the need for more uniform standards in nurse practitioner education, a consortium of nurse practitioner educator organizations and certification bodies is examining methods to integrate program evaluation standards into the accreditation process for nurse practitioner educational programs across all specialties. Nurse practitioner education had its beginnings in programs initially based in continuing education departments of universities, hospitals and other education-based entities. Promoted by federal government grants, these programs evolved into advanced practice educational programs offered in graduate schools of nursing throughout the country (Geolot, 1987). The success of these programs and the quality of the service of their graduates fostered nurse practitioner role and program expansion from its initial focus in pediatrics to women's health, family, adult, gerontology and other specialties.

With the evolution of nurse practitioner programs, specialty groups and faculty organizations developed separate standards. The *Criteria for Evaluation of Nurse Practitioner Programs* (1997), which was developed by the National Task Force on Quality Nurse Practitioner Education, is a document that received endorsement from 23 nursing and nurse practitioner organizations. In addition, a national effort is underway to refine and update a consensus-based set of outcome competencies for each nurse practitioner specialty. The need for a uniform and standardized process to provide continued quality assurance for nurse practitioner programs has led this consortium to move forward with its examination of this issue.

The Current Environment

The role of the nurse practitioner has evolved over the past 30 years within the context of society's need for primary and specialty care. Economic and societal directives have significantly altered the health care delivery system resulting in changes for all health care provider roles, especially the nurse practitioner. In response to recent increasing demand for nurse practitioners in the market place, the number of educational programs has expanded significantly. The National Organization of Nurse Practitioner Faculties (NONPF) and the American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN) jointly collect data on enrollment and graduations for nursing baccalaureate and graduate programs and monitor changes over time. From 1992 to 1995 the number of nurse practitioner programs escalated from 119 to 202 with a corresponding increase in specialty tracks from 253 to 527 (Harper and Johnson, 1996). Presently, 323 institutions house nurse practitioner programs in the United States with a combined total of 792 specialty tracks (e.g. family, adult, pediatric, gerontologic, school health, women's health, acute care)(Berlin & Bednash, 2000).

Nurse practitioner students now predominate in graduate nursing education programs. These programs are presently graduating 63 percent of the master's students in nursing, significantly higher than clinical nurse specialist (10%), nurse midwifery (3%) and nurse anesthesia (3%) programs (Berlin, Bednash, 2000). Of these specialty tracks, 78 percent of the graduates are from family, adult and pediatric concentrations. The remaining 22 percent are from gerontologic, women's health and other specialty tracks. The issues surrounding this growth in educational programs have led to the recommendation of establishing a uniform process of accreditation of nurse practitioner programs based on national criteria to farther assure program quality.

The current environment for nurse practitioner practice, especially within primary care venues demands that master's nurse practitioner programs prepare highly competent providers for an intensely competitive market. Nurse practitioners provide high quality, evidence based, health care services to consumers. More importantly, nurse practitioner care has long been targeted to high risk and underserved populations. Managed care is asking nurse practitioners to offer full scope primary care to a broad segment of patients of all ages with multiple problems. Given the complexity of these market forces, nurse educators are being asked to prepare an extremely well grounded advanced practice nurse for all settings. The National Council of State Boards of Nursing, national nurse practitioners certifying organizations, nurse practitioner education programs and the accrediting bodies share concerns over the impact and burdens of these issues. To meet health care environment needs, it is necessary to build a clear foundation of national standards and to augment the review process that ensures quality nurse practitioner education at the graduate nursing level.

Issues

The Commission on Collegiate Nursing Education and the National League for Nursing Accrediting Commission, the two nationally recognized nursing accreditations bodies, conduct extensive over all nursing education program reviews, including all graduate nurse practitioner programs. In addition, certified nurse-midwives, certified nurse anesthetists and women's health nurse practitioners have established separate accreditation programs that are recognized by the national nursing accreditation bodies and are specific to their specialized area of practice.

The processes of program review currently utilized by the state boards of nursing and the nurse practitioner certification programs vary in methodology, depth and breadth of evaluation. There is undue strain on the entire system due to this lack of uniformity and the multiple processes that educational programs must undertake to ensure that students gain national certification and state recognition to practice.

Accreditation aims to ensure academic quality and accountability at the onset and encourages improvement through an ongoing systematic self-study process. Program review is less comprehensive than is accreditation and is performed to meet standards of a specific certification or regulatory agency. Quality accreditation organizations seek recognition from such agencies as the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) and the Department of Education (DOE). This recognition assures the public that the accrediting organization has met minimal standards for ensuring quality in academic programs. Because of this, accreditation remains the standard and has greater public recognition than program review.

Nursing education accreditation programs were not originally created to evaluate specialty content in nurse practitioner programs. However, this consortium believes that evaluative processes, comparable to that of the American College of Nurse Midwives and the National Association of Nurse Anesthetists Council on Accreditation, are important to meet professional standards required by national certifying bodies and state boards of nursing who are responsible for protecting the public.

Recommendations of the Pew Task Force on Accreditation

According to the Pew Task Force on Accreditation, (Task Force on Accreditation of Health Professions Education, 1999) educational accreditation provides a guarantee of program quality in the public eye. In five recommendations the task force suggests:

1. Educational institutions, programs and accreditors recognize their shared responsibility for responding to the changing needs of the public, employers, professional bodies and students;
2. Educators and accreditors work together to foster an organizational culture centered on educational assessment and improvement that promotes necessary change in educational processes at the institutional level;
3. Accreditation reward innovative methods to enhance efficiency, minimize waste and duplication and streamline assessment processes;
4. All specialized and professional accrediting agencies adopt a consistent approach to accreditation;
5. Accrediting agencies must continually review their own accreditation programs and make improvements to ensure that they respond to stake holder needs.

According to the Pew Task Force Recommendations, accreditation programs provide a forum for guided self evaluation and improvement relying on common standards and incorporating peer review to evaluate the effectiveness of a program based on predetermined standards. An established accreditation program provides for the determination of competencies needed for practice through a collaborative approach, reducing duplication and establishing effective linkages with stakeholders. Collaboration of this nature helps to create an environment where improvement is planned and directed and processes that lead to safe, high quality education are part of the routine and ongoing daily work of the educational program. Accreditation programs should be developed that are efficient and reduce waste and duplication in their assessment mechanisms so that accountability is heightened and redundancy is minimized. A consistent approach to accreditation should include these common criteria in order to ensure accountability: ongoing faculty development and evaluation, assessment of students' and graduates' competencies, emphasis on the needs of the constituents served, systems for ongoing continuous improvement and an accurate self representation,(Task Force on Accreditation of Health Professions Education, 1999).

Options

A uniform accreditation process which specifically evaluates the quality of nurse practitioner academic programs is needed to protect the public and unburden programs, faculty and students from the multiple documentation and approval processes currently undertaken by various credentialing and accreditation entities. This process could be accomplished in one of three ways:

1. Have specific nurse practitioner educational program evaluation integrated into the Commission on Collegiate Nursing Education (CCNE) and National League for Nursing Accrediting Commission (NLNAC) accreditation processes now undertaken by schools of nursing,
2. Reconfigure the current DOE-recognized women's health accreditation program to encompass all specialties of nurse practitioners, or
3. Create a new accreditation program.

The second or third option, if implemented, would be conducted in a manner similar to the current nurse anesthetist and nurse midwife accreditation processes and could be conducted in conjunction with CCNE or NLNAC accreditation activities (as the American Association of Nurse Anesthetists Council on Accreditation and the American College of Nurse Midwives currently are exploring). This Consortium,

however, believes that the first option is consistent with the current Pew Foundation recommendation and the philosophy of the Council on Higher Education Accreditation and, therefore, should be fully implemented.

Conclusion

With increased demand for nurse practitioner services and the subsequent increase in nurse practitioner programs throughout the United States, the need to maintain established high educational standards is paramount. The Consortium for Quality Nurse Practitioner Education was formed to identify mechanisms to improve evaluation of nurse practitioner programs and to make recommendations regarding the national need for accreditation of nurse practitioner programs. Three processes were identified and prioritized by the Consortium as viable methods for undertaking this activity with the specificity necessary to meet the educational and practice standards required of nurse practitioners in the current health care arena. The integration of more specific criteria will enhance and refine the existing review processes for nurse practitioner programs. The Consortium contends that through the development and utilization of such an accreditation process, the established quality of nurse practitioner education will be able to be maintained, and that nurse practitioners will be recognized as leaders in both present and future health care systems in this country and throughout the world.

References:

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