



A snapshot of practice nurses in Australia

Who are Practice Nurses?

Practice nurses are qualified registered or enrolled nurses¹ who deliver primary health care in a general practice setting. The environment in which they work is often unpredictable and involves caring for a broad group of people from diverse backgrounds and at all stages of life.

The Practice Nurse's Role

The practice nurse plays a pivotal role in health promotion, health maintenance and prevention of illness by providing care, information and education to individuals and the community.

While the role of the practice nurse varies according to the type of patients they see and the general practice setting in which they work, the practice nurse works in both a clinical and managerial capacity. This means practice nurses must work collaboratively with others, both within the practice and in the broader community.

Practice nursing is a relatively new area of clinical practice in Australia. A combination of factors such as a greater focus on health promotion and chronic disease management, general practitioner workforce shortages and an ageing population have seen the role of practice nurses expand and develop.

In 2005 there were approximately 5,000 practice nurses employed in doctor's rooms² and more than half (57%) of general practitioners were reported to employ a practice nurse. Anecdotally that figure has now risen considerably to around 8,000 in 2007³. Practice nurses are now employed in nearly 60% of Australia's general practices⁴.

The role of nurses in general practice includes, but is not limited to, the following:⁵

Clinical nursing services:

- triage and patient assessment
- clinical patient care, e.g. wound care
- diagnostic services
- clinical data management.

Health promotion and chronic disease management

- health screening
- immunisation
- health check reminders, e.g. pap smear reminders
- patient education
- outreach services, e.g. visiting elderly patients unable to visit practice
- acute and chronic disease management, e.g. diabetes and asthma management

Coordinating patient services:

- working with GPs to plan and manage patient care
- liaising with allied health and community care services
- coordinating delivery of health care services
- ensuring continuity of care
- facilitating effective communication between patients and health care providers
- patient advocacy.

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Promoting patient, carer and community well being:

- providing education and health information
- delivering specific programs
- engaging in community development
- educating about self care.

Managing clinical standards and legislative requirements:

- infection control and sterilisation
- monitoring incidence of infectious disease
- records management
- occupational health and safety
- participating in accreditation processes
- maintaining medical supplies.

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Management of human and material resources:

- optimising the use of professional resources
- building the practice base
- building practice capacity to adapt to change
- maximising financial efficiency.

As regulated health professionals, registered nurses are not 'supervised' nor do they provide care 'for and on behalf of' any other health care professional. Nurses provide care in collaboration with general practitioners and other health care providers, focusing on positive outcomes for all people.

Where enrolled nurses work in general practice they must be supervised, directly or indirectly by a registered nurse.

Practice nurses should not be confused with nurse practitioners. 'Nurse Practitioner' is a title protected by state and territory nursing legislation.

See also: [A Snapshot of Nurse Practitioners](#).

1. Known as Division 1 (RN) and Division 2 (EN) in Victoria.
2. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2008) Nursing and Midwifery Labour Force 2005, additional tables, table 3. <http://www.aihw.gov.au/publications/hwl/nmlf05/nmlf05-xx-registered-enrolled-nurses-work-setting.xls>
3. Australian Practice Nurses Association (2008). <http://www.apna.asn.au>, accessed May 2008.
4. Australian Practice Nurses Association website: <http://www.apna.asn.au/displaycommon.cfm?an=2>
5. Australian General Practice Network, Australian Nursing Federation, Australian Practice Nurses Association (2006). Nursing in General Practice Recruitment and Orientation Resource. <http://www.agpn.com.au>