Nursing Matters fact sheets provide quick reference information and international perspectives from the nursing profession on current health and social issues.

**Credentialing**

Credentialing is a means of assuring quality and protecting the public by confirming that individuals, programmes, institutions or products meet agreed standards. Credentialing is becoming increasingly important as health systems strive to address issues of public safety and quality services.

However, the concept of credentialing is defined and used in a variety of ways. This can lead to confusion and complexity. Recognising this, ICN developed a credentialing framework which identifies the key elements of credentialing and which can be used to gather data for analysing and comparing credentialing standards, mechanisms and processes. A diagrammatic overview of the credentialing framework is attached.

ICN uses the following broad definition of credentialing:

Credentialing is a term applied to processes used to designate that an individual, programme, institution or product have met established standards set by an agent (governmental or non-governmental) recognised as qualified to carry out this task. The standards may be minimal and mandatory or above the minimum and voluntary. Licensure, registration, accreditation, approval, certification, recognition or endorsement may be used to describe different credentialing processes but this terminology is not applied consistently across different settings and countries. Credentials are marks or “stamps” of quality and achievement communicating to employers, payers, and consumers what to expect from a “credentialed” nurse, specialist, course or programme of study, institution of higher education, hospital or health service, or healthcare product, technology, or device. Credentials may be periodically renewed as a means of assuring continued quality and they may be withdrawn when standards of competence or behaviour are no longer met. (Styles and Affara, 1997)

**Issues in credentialing**

Changes in the social, political, economic and technological environments impact on the environment for health and health care and on professional practice. These changes provide challenges and opportunities for the nursing profession to develop and support effective credentialing systems in an increasingly global environment. The nursing profession itself leads many initiatives but can also work in partnership with others groups, including the public. The pace of development of credentialing in the health field is different in different countries.
In many countries, credentialing of entry to practice nursing programmes, are subject to mandatory credentialing processes and mechanisms, usually through some form of accreditation determined by the professional regulatory body or government. This helps promote uniformity in standards of the educational programmes in a country, communicates to potential students and employers that the educational programme has reached certain standards, usually above the minimum required, and finally as accreditation is usually renewed periodically it ensures that programmes are kept up to date and improved through this mechanism of external review.

There is increasing interest in developing credentialing mechanisms within an international or global framework, which provide nurses with opportunities to demonstrate special or advanced expertise. These include successful completion of approved education and practice programmes which lead to the award of credentials for advanced practice nurses or for nurses working in specialist practice. These credentials can be used as steps in a career development ladder for individual nurses or as evidence of quality standards by employing organisations.

There are different groups involved in credentialing e.g. regulatory bodies, governments, professional organisations and organisations created to accredit health facilities or educational programmes. There is a growing interest on the part of National Nurses Associations (NNAs) in providing direct credentialing services. A recent ICN survey (2003) indicated that National Nurses Associations (NNAs) are involved at various levels in credentialing activities. Some carry out a full range of activities including setting and validation of standards; provision of resources, consultation and advice; and award of credentials. Others play a more limited role.

At present, only a few NNAs are involved in credentialing for specialist and advanced practice nursing. More are involved in approving continuing education programmes or accrediting providers of continuing education. However, feedback from ICN's Council of National Representative workshop in 2003, indicated that many more were interested in exploring further how to begin to provide credentialing services for nurses in their countries.

In an era where evidence of efficiency and effectiveness is becoming an essential component in decision-making about resource allocation, credentialers are required to make the case that credentialing does contribute to positive care outcomes. Thus, NNAs, other professional organisations and regulatory bodies are being challenged to develop the evidence base for credentialing. Consequently, ICN has developed a registry of credentialing research ICN-RCR to help disseminate research findings in the field of credentialing: www.icn.ch/rcr/home.htm. It is hoped that this will be stimulate greater dissemination of completed and on-going research in this field, and encourage greater exchange of information and collaboration in credentialing research.
The increasing mobility of the nursing and health care workforce has led to the development of bilateral, international and regional Mutual Recognition Agreements (MRAs) whereby nursing and other qualifications and credentials are recognised and accepted across borders. Thus, there is increasing interest in streamlining credentialing standards, processes and mechanisms to facilitate the different parties in reaching acceptable and realisable MRAs, thus easing the movement of competent professionals holding transferable credentials. This raises a whole host of issues that need to be resolved at the international level and in line with the growing number of regional and international trade agreements that are being implemented. Not the least among these are the issues of cultural and language competence.

The willingness of individuals to seek health care and health services beyond their national borders and the focus on risk management and insurance requirements have provided an impetus to health service providers to secure national or international accreditation of their services. This has led to an increasing number of players, including governments and others, becoming involved in credentialing. Large numbers of “for profit” and “not for profit” organisations offer a growing range of credentialing services including accreditation of organisations and approval or endorsement of products. However, these often lack nursing sensitive standards. However, we are beginning to see some moves by national nurses associations and other nursing organisation to extend credentialing services into the international arena such as the Magnet Accreditation system developed by the American Nurses Credentialing Center.

This raises questions about the appropriate and legitimate role of the nursing profession in credentialing. In many countries professional regulatory bodies, answerable to government, undertake a wide range of regulatory and credentialing activities. In others, the focus is on a narrow range of activities mainly restricted to control and discipline rather than development and innovation. In a number of countries NNAs are responsible for the whole range of regulatory and credentialing activities. However, there are still some countries that have made little or no progress, or are in the early stages of introducing regulatory and credentialing frameworks.

ICN provides a range of credentialing services and products. These include publications including standards, competencies and guidelines; approval of educational activities for the award of continuing education credits; consultancy and advice to individuals, groups, organisations and governments; advocacy at international and global level; and opportunities for interaction amongst interested parties through meetings, conferences and web based activities.

For further information, please contact: icn@icn.ch
References

The International Council of Nurses (ICN) is a federation of more than 130 national nurses associations representing the millions of nurses worldwide. Operated by nurses and leading nursing internationally, ICN works to ensure quality nursing care for all and sound health policies globally.
ICN CREDENTIALING FRAMEWORK

PURPOSE
Public protection
Professional accountability
Quality practice/services

Individuals/nurses
- Entry Level
- Specialist
- Advanced Practice

Institutions/Programmes
- Education
  - Institution
  - Programme
- Healthcare Services
  - Institution
  - Programme

Products/Technologies
- Education
- Healthcare Services
- Institution
- Programme

ELEMENTS OF CREDENTIALING
- Credentialee
- Credentialed
- Purpose
- Powers
- Standards
- Forms/Mechanisms
- Processes
- Duration
- Costs
- Effectiveness
- Mutual Recognition Agreements