Nurses and primary health care

ICN Position:

The International Council of Nurses (ICN) believes that equity and access to primary health care services, particularly nursing services, are key to improving the health and wellbeing of all people.

Together with its member associations, ICN advocates for the rights of all people to equitable and effective health care services, and endorses the Alma Ata Declaration\(^1\) on primary health care (PHC) as a means for attaining a level of health that will permit people to lead a socially and economically productive life.

Nationally and internationally, ICN and its members collaborate with governments and non-governmental organisations to ensure more effective implementation of primary health care. In planning and implementing PHC services, ICN urges a multisectoral approach and adherence to the following principles:

- Health services are made equally accessible to all, encouraging to the maximum: individual and community participation in services planning and operation; a focus on illness prevention and health promotion; appropriate, affordable technologies; and a multi-sectorial approach necessary for wellbeing in a society.
- The focus of health care is the individual, family or group in need of services, whether for health promotion, protection from illness and disability, cure and rehabilitation, or care for peaceful, dignified death.
- Health provider education is both scientific and ethical and recognises the primacy of social determinants of health.
- Health care providers respect the rights of the individual, family and community to make an informed decision about care and related treatment.
- Research findings and evaluation of technologies are of direct benefit to patients and the public.
- In support of Primary Health Care ICN views it critical that PHC concepts be integrated into all levels of nursing education and that the nurse’s role in PHC leadership be strengthened and articulated at all levels nationally and internationally.

Background

The world’s population faces a future in which health and wellbeing may be adversely affected by rapid advances in technology; the depletion of natural resources and environmental degradation; population growth; the impact of new health problems (e.g. AIDS) and long recognised diseases (e.g. malaria). Other factors, such as ageing of the population and concern for those with chronic and terminal illnesses, place growing demands on health and social services.

In 1978 ICN declared its support for primary health care and its intent to cooperate at the national and international levels with governmental and non-governmental organisations in making primary health care an effective reality to meet the health needs of populations.

In the ensuing years ICN and national nurses associations (NNAs) have been instrumental in lobbying for inclusion of PHC principles and programmes in health provider education, in service planning and delivery, and in research and evaluation. Many NNAs are promoting initiatives to incorporate PHC into nursing practice and policy.

Nurses are the principal group of health personnel providing primary health care at all levels and maintaining links between individuals, families, communities and the rest of the health care system. Working with other sectors, other members of the health care team or on their own, nurses explore new and better ways of keeping well, or improving health and preventing disease and disability. Nurses improve equity and access to health care and add quality to the outcome of care. It is important that nursing education programmes integrate PHC at basic and post-basic levels.

Adopted in 2000
Reviewed and revised in 2007

Previously: Health Care and Quality of Life Riga Reaffirmation

Related ICN Positions:

- Participation of nurses in health services decision-making and policy development

The International Council of Nurses 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.