

American Association of Critical-Care Nurses Scope of Practice For Nursing Care of the Critically Ill Patient and Family

The delivery of quality care to the critically ill has been the primary goal of the American Association of Critical-Care Nurses since its inception in 1969. Supporting a contemporary and enduring model of patient-centered care, AACN has defined the scope of critical care nursing, the patient, and the environment of care. This scope of practice articulates the contributions of critical care nursing to a patient-driven healthcare system.

A scope of practice defines the contributions and domains of nursing and specialty nursing practice. Although critical care is a distinct specialty, it is inseparable from the profession of nursing as a whole. Critical care nursing recognizes that the boundaries of specialty practice are often fluid, responding to changing patient needs in the healthcare environment. As members of the profession, critical care nurses are committed to protecting, maintaining, and restoring the health of those entrusted to their care. Regardless of specialty, nursing's contribution is to create a safe passage for patients and their families. The critical care nurse's unique challenge is to create a safe passage for patients and families who are in the most vulnerable circumstances and the most threatening environments.

The Nurse and the Patient

The American Association of Critical-Care Nurses defines critical care nursing as the specialty that deals with human responses to life-threatening problems. The scope of practice for nursing care of critically ill patients of all ages encompasses the dynamic interaction of the critically ill patient and his or her family, the critical care nurses, and the

environment of care. The goal of critical care nursing is to ensure the effective interaction of these three requisite elements, resulting in optimal patient outcomes.

Nurses recognize patients and their families as the fundamental and central focus for the delivery of nursing services. A commitment to the vision of a patient-driven healthcare system requires a holistic view of patients and their families and a recognition of their multiple facets including physical, emotional, spiritual, and cultural dimensions. Such a commitment requires care choices and family to be defined from the patient's viewpoint. The framework within which critical care nursing is practiced is based on a scientific body of specialized knowledge, an ethical model for decision making, a commitment to interdisciplinary collaboration in the care of patients, and the Synergy Model¹, which describes nurses/patient interrelatedness.

Critical care nurses rely on a specialized body of knowledge, skills and experiences to:

- Support and maintain the physiologic stability of patients.
- Assimilate and prioritize information sources to take immediate and decisive patient-focused action.
- Respond with confidence and adapt to rapidly changing patient conditions.
- Respond to the unique needs of patients and families coping with unanticipated treatment, quality of life, and end-of-life decisions.
- Manage appropriately the interface between patient and technology that may be threatening, invasive, and complex, so that human needs for a safe, respectful, healing, humane, and caring environment are established and maintained.

- Monitor and allocate critical care services, recognizing the fiduciary role of nurses working in a resource intensive environment.

The Environment

Critical care nurses practice in settings where patients require complex assessment and therapies, high intensity interventions, and continuous nursing vigilance. Nursing is a constant in the critical care environment. As part of an interdisciplinary team, nurses work to create healing, humane, and caring environments characterized as follows:

- Providers act as advocates on behalf of patients, families, and communities.
- Patient and family values dominate.
- Practice is based in research and driven by outcomes.
- Ethical decision making is supported, fostered, and promoted.
- Collaboration is embraced.
- Leadership is fostered at all levels and in all activities.
- Life-long learning is fundamental to professional growth.

- Existing talents and resources are optimized.
- Innovation and creativity are rewarded.
- Diversity is respected.

The broadest perspective of the environment encompasses a global view of those factors that have an impact on the provision of care to critically ill patients and their families. Monitoring legal, regulatory, social, economic, and political trends is necessary to promote early recognition of the potential implications for critical care nursing and to provide a basis for a timely response.

The AACN Scope of Practice provides a context for nursing specialty practice. It defines the significant and unique contributions of critical care nurses. This scope of practice serves as a catalyst to support nursing practice that is driven by the needs of patients and their families.

Reference

1. Villaire M. The Synergy Model of Certified Practice: Creating Safe Passage for Patients. *Critical Care Nurse*. 1996;16(4):95-99.

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