

# PROFESSIONAL NURSING PRACTICE

## FACT SHEET SERIES



### *Decision-Making in Nursing Practice*

Contemporary nursing practice requires nurses to be involved in complex decision-making in a range of environments for a variety of purposes. The decisions that nurses make in their daily practice include those related to: clinical interventions and their effectiveness; unit/facility policies and protocols; communication; role relationships among health personnel; delegation among nurses and to other health care providers; expansions to scopes of practice; safe staffing levels; and, service organisation, delivery and management.

The guiding principle for all decision-making in nursing, irrespective of its nature and purpose, is to achieve the best health outcomes for patients and clients.

### *Decision-making models and frameworks*

As nursing practice occurs in increasingly complex and diverse environments where nurses are accountable for their actions and the outcomes of the decisions that they make, models and frameworks which support nurses to make the most appropriate decisions in their practice have been developed. These range from accessible research evidence databases to decision-making frameworks developed by regulatory authorities.

### *Clinical decision-making*

Clinical decisions made by nurses commonly relate to choosing and implementing nursing interventions, evaluating their effectiveness and communication related to interventions to patients, families and colleagues.

Effective clinical decisions which result in health improvements for patients are the product of complex decision-making processes that take account of available evidence, the context of care and available resources, patient/client preference and clinical expertise.

Nurses make these decisions frequently each day while planning and delivering care by using the complex knowledge and skills they have gained through education and experience.

To maximise the effectiveness and appropriateness of clinical decisions which ensure the safety of all patients, clinical guidelines and toolkits, facility policies and protocols, best practice resources and other research evidence have been developed to support nurses' clinical decision-making processes<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Clinical Excellence Commission, 2009, Resources, Tools and Toolkits, available online at: <http://www.cec.health.nsw.gov.au/resources.html>

The Joanna Briggs Institute, 2009, Evidenced Based Nursing, available online at: [http://www.joannabriggs.edu.au/about/eb\\_nursing.php](http://www.joannabriggs.edu.au/about/eb_nursing.php)

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### *Practice decision-making*

Current practice requires nurses to make decisions about delegation and advancement or expansion of scopes of practice in a context of increasing patient acuity and complexity of care needs, a growing volume of patients/clients with a diversity of casemix, and greater consumer expectations and demand for accountability.

To assist nurses in making these decisions, national frameworks which provide nurses with tools to guide their practice decisions so that quality and safety are maintained, have been developed. The decision-making tools are principle based so they will be sustainable over time. The principles are intended to provide guidance for all nurses in professional decision-making while accommodating differences in the education and competence of the individual and the context in which they practice<sup>2</sup>.

The frameworks and tools support nurses to incorporate new developments into their practice in a planned and structured way, taking account of the factors which influence nurses' scope of practice.

The frameworks also give nurses a mechanism that can be used to influence health workforce planning by providing a unified and coherent way to describe nursing practice and dismantle the barriers to expanding scopes of practice. They assist nurses to determine their own practice according to professionally agreed principles and escape unnecessary restrictions imposed by employers.

### *Staffing decision-making*

Contemporary nursing practice takes place in an environment of increasing budgetary pressures, which seek to ensure that care is delivered in the most cost-effective manner. Attempts to contain costs have resulted in reductions in the proportion of qualified nurses in the health system, which has the potential to compromise patient/client outcomes.

To ensure patient/client safety and improve outcomes, adequate nurse staffing and appropriate skill mixes are required.

Nurse staffing decisions based on evidence-informed principles, which ensure that the right number of appropriately qualified nurses is available to ensure safe and competent care, lead to the best outcomes for patients and clients.

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<sup>2</sup> ANMC, 2007, A national framework for the development of decision-making tools for nursing and midwifery practice, Available online at: <http://www.anmc.org.au/docs/Research%20and%20Policy/DMF%20Project/DRAFT%20FRAMEWORK%2015%20APR%202007%20for%20Council.pdf>

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Evidence-informed principles for staffing decisions consider:

- the health care needs of the patients or clients;
- the acuity of the patients, the complexity of their specific health care needs and the predictability of the outcomes to the care provided;
- the competence of the nurses; this must take account of the individual nurse's education, scope of practice (which is determined by education, experience, legislative and organisational factors) and familiarity with the setting.

Other factors that are taken into consideration include: work intensity; physical layout of the unit; and, availability of adequate support staff.

Tools and classification systems, which assist in measuring nursing workload, patient acuity and patient/client demand for nursing care, provide nurses with empirical evidence to support nurse staffing decisions.

All decisions made by nurses must be:

- lawful;
- appropriate for the context;
- consistent with agreed professional nursing standards;
- consistent with the service provider's policies; and,
- intended to lead better health outcomes for patients/clients.