

**Investigation of the role dimensions, clinical competence, educational preparation and professional development needs of practice nurses, a national research study.**

**UCC**

**Background:**

Developments in primary care have challenged practice nurses to determine their role and contribution within the health care team. The literature reports ambiguity regarding the role and educational needs of practice nurses in the United Kingdom, Australia and Ireland. Additionally there is a dearth of literature regarding the clinical competence of practice nurses.

**Aim:**

To investigate the role dimensions, clinical competence, educational preparation and professional development needs of practice nurses.

**Methodology:**

A quantitative methodology used purposeful sampling (n=1519). A research developed questionnaire was used. Questions relating to the role dimensions and professional development were based on a UK study by Crossman (2008) and the role of the practice nurse as delineated by the Irish College of General Practitioners (ICGP, 2006). Level of competency was assessed using Benner's (1984) Competency Model. Experts in the area of practice nursing were consulted during the instrument development process. Data were collected via a national postal survey coordinated by the Professional Development Co-ordinators for practice nurses. This yielded a response rate of 31% (n=466). Data were analysed using SPSS.

**Results:**

Regular activities included immunisation, phlebotomy, management of lab results, wound care and ECG taking. Cervical screening, dietary advice and health screening were also indicated by over 85% of practice nurses as a regular role dimension and

80% of practice nurses perceived their level of competency in these areas at proficient or expert. Chronic disease management, namely diabetes and hypertension, was cited by over 78% of practice nurses as a regular role, less than 50% of practice nurses deemed themselves either expert or proficient in this area. Education and training deficits were noted in chronic disease management, nurse prescribing, mental health advice and women's health. Educational preparation was viewed as 'essential to maintaining a standard of care' and 72% (n=326) indicated that they required further training to carry out their role. However over 60% felt that there were obstacles such as, funding (n=128), lack of time (n=113) and getting cover for clinics (n=76). 50% of respondents were unclear about whom to approach for funding. Lack of resources to implement nurse-led clinics was evident however the majority of practice nurses had support from their employing GP to achieve their professional development goals.

### **Conclusion:**

Findings provided information on the role of the practice nurse and highlighted educational deficits. Results indicated varying levels of competence from novice to expert and were positively affected by further education and the frequency at which the role was performed. The results provide data on the perceived barriers to further education. It is clear that in order for practice nursing to develop within the new structure of primary health care, role clarity and recognition needs to be addressed nationally and the contribution of practice nurses and its potential for future developments recognized. Future research on the GP perspective of the role dimensions and professional development needs of the practice nurse is required, as they are largely responsible in determining the direction of the role.

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