

CERTIFICATION OF SPECIALTY PRACTICE FOR ADVANCED PRACTICE NURSING ROLES

Establishing Evidence-Informed Recommendations



THE ISSUE

- Globally, there is heightened demand for APNs to address increasingly specialized and complex patient healthcare needs.
- Systematic approaches to examining the characteristics and outcomes of APN specialty certification are lacking.
- Improved understanding of best practices for APN specialty certification is important for patient safety and strengthening the nursing workforce.

WHAT WE DID

To provide internationally relevant recommendations about the certification of CNSs, NPs, and APNs working in specialty areas, we:

1. Established an international advisory committee to inform project aims and methods.
2. Conducted scoping reviews of the published and grey literature. A comparative analysis examined the structures, processes, and outcomes of selected international programs.
3. Engaged 72 APN stakeholders from 25 countries through meetings and interviews to inform recommendations.

KEY FINDINGS

- 28 APN specialty certification programs were found worldwide.
- Country contexts (e.g., population size; geography; culture; social; economic; healthcare governance and labor market needs; nursing profession, regulation, and education) influence APN specialty certification.
- 2 types of specialty certification were identified: mandatory entry-to-practice and voluntary post-entry-to-practice, each with advantages and disadvantages related to patient safety, quality of care, and impact on the nursing and APN workforce.
- Program structures (i.e., type of certifying organization, competency development, resources, and cost) and processes (i.e., certification and recertification requirements) varied across programs.
- Limited research has evaluated the impact of APN specialty certification on patient, APN, provider, organization, or system outcomes.
- Consistent agreement among APN stakeholders about the perceived benefits of APN specialty certification related to:
 - Increased patient access to safe, high-quality care
 - Hiring APNs with appropriate expertise
 - Strengthening the development, recruitment, and retention of the APN workforce

PRINCIPLES FOR MAKING DECISIONS TO DEVELOP, IMPLEMENT, AND EVALUATE APN SPECIALTY CERTIFICATION PROGRAMS

- Stakeholder-engaged, multi-pronged approaches are essential for making informed decisions that address country contexts.
- Base programs on a well-defined nursing workforce plan and prioritized goals to meet population health and labor market needs.
- Clear definitions of generalist and specialist practice are foundational to APN role development.
- Ensure public safety while supporting the development of a flexible APN workforce that values specialty certification.
- Use an equity lens to address health disparities, improve access to care, and promote education and employment equity for APNs.
- Think globally to:
 - Develop consistent specialty practice competencies, standards, and education across countries.
 - Leverage existing expertise and resources to create a sufficient cohort of APNs for sustainable specialty certification programs.
- Selection of competency assessment methods should consider:
 - Public safety, rigor ensuring the consistency and reliability of certification processes, and value for APNs and employers.
 - Feasibility, and appropriateness to role and specialty area.
 - Recertification as a process to demonstrate role advancement and ongoing professional growth within and beyond the specialty.

SIGNIFICANCE

This is the first international study providing evidence-informed and stakeholder-engaged approaches for APN specialty certification. The results provide strategic guidance for strengthening the specialty nursing and APN workforce at national and international levels.

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Abbreviations:

APN = Advanced practice Nurse, CNS = Clinical Nurse Specialist,

NP = Nurse Practitioner