

Nurse Practitioners in Primary Care

To meet the challenges of an aging population, rising costs, chronic disease and a shortage of primary care physicians, the U.S. health care system must maximize the use of nurse practitioners (NPs), especially in primary care.

Nearly 90 percent of the 192,000 NPs are educated and prepared in primary care, and more than 75 percent of active practitioners are primary care clinicians. NPs serve as the most rapidly growing component of the primary care workforce.

NP Scope of Practice and Preparation

The NP scope of practice encompasses a combination of nursing and medical services for individuals, families and groups. NPs diagnose and manage acute and chronic conditions and emphasize health promotion and disease prevention. They order, conduct and interpret diagnostic tests, prescribe pharmacologic agents and non-pharmacologic therapies, and counsel patients, among other vital services. NPs practice autonomously and in collaboration with other health care professionals to manage patients' health needs.

NPs are prepared through academic master's and often doctoral programs, which include didactic and clinical courses designed to provide specialized knowledge and clinical primary care competencies. Members of the profession are responsible for advancing the NP role, specifying the professional standards and competencies, as well as ensuring that these are met.

NP Commitment to Primary Care

Nearly 90 percent of NPs are clinically educated in primary care fields, such as adult, family and gerontology, pediatrics and women's health (see top right). These professionals are prepared to meet the full range of primary care needs, including providing care at first contact for undifferentiated conditions, ongoing management of acute and chronic conditions, health promotion and care coordination.

Specialty	Percent
Acute Care	5.3
Adult*	17.9
Family*	49.2
Gerontological*	3.0
Neonatal	2.3
Oncology	0.8
Pediatric*	9.4
Psychiatric/Mental Health	2.9
Women's Health	9.1

**Primary care field*

NP Growth

NP program enrollment and graduation rates have increased consistently in recent years (see below). As illustrated above, significant percentages of these students pursue primary care fields.

Years	Enrollments	Graduations
2005-2006	22,115	6,556
2006-2007	25,473	7,197
2007-2008	28,744	7,550
2008-2009	31,445	8,451
2009-2010	35,371	9,203
2010-2011		11,000
2011-2012		14,000

NP Quality and Cost-Effectiveness

Four decades of evaluation and research consistently illustrates that NP care is high quality and cost-effective. For example, the 2010 Institute of Medicine report, *The Future of Nursing: Leading Change, Advancing Health*, details the “proven track record” of advanced practice nurses, such as NPs, in care delivery across populations and settings.

NPs in Rural Health

Compared to other primary care providers, NPs are most likely to practice in rural communities. In fact, 18 percent of NPs practice in communities of fewer than 25,000 residents. NPs are also significantly more likely to practice in rural communities if states have favorable regulatory environments as well as large rural populations. To illustrate, states with the favorable regulations have the highest reported percentage of NPs practicing in rural areas, including: Vermont (56%), South Dakota (50%), Wyoming (43%), Montana (40%) and Maine (39%). By contrast, Texas has both great expanses of rural communities and restrictive requirements regarding NP supervision. Thirteen percent of Texas NPs practice in communities with fewer than 25,000 residents.

NPs and Select Populations

NPs are critical health care providers for our nation’s most vulnerable patients (see below).

	Family NPs	Adult NPs
Accepts Medicaid	80%	80%
Accepts Medicare	88%	88%
Accepts uninsured patients	60%	60%
Treats patients between 66-85 years	93%	97%
Treats patients older than 85 years	79%	84%

Summary

For more than forty-five years, NPs have provided patient-centered health care to a broad range of populations. The American Association of Nurse Practitioners’ vision for the future calls for high-quality health care for all, by the patient’s provider of choice. There is a critical need for all primary care providers to practice to the full extent of their scope of practice. As our nation faces the future challenges of an aging population, rising health care costs, and the growing burden of chronic disease, NPs bring strength to the health care workforce and maximize our available potential to address these challenges.

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