



NGNA: Position Paper on Essential Gerontological Nursing Education in Registered Nursing and Continuing Education Programs

Introduction/Problem Statement

The intent of this position statement is to affirm the need for essential gerontological education for all pre-licensure registered nurse programs (Diploma, Associate, and Baccalaureate) to build gerontological nurse competence. A further intent is to recommend that all registered nurses who provide care for the older adult populations participate in on-going gerontological nursing continuing education. It is recognized that most nurses will contribute to the delivery of care for older adults at some time during their professional careers. The adult population, over the age of 65, is increasing at a rate that has never been seen before around the world. Soon to comprise 20% of the population in the United States, older adults are the recipients of more than 50% of health care across all settings. Preparing nurses to provide care based on gerontological nursing evidenced-based best practice is a major challenge the nursing profession is facing in the 21st century. This requires new and innovative approaches for educating nursing students as well as nurses in practice and academic settings.

Rationale and Supporting Information

The 21st century brings a burgeoning increase in the aging population globally, resulting in numerous challenges in the health care arena. Registered nurses must be prepared in both the educational and clinical settings to care for this complex aging population with their unique needs. The normal aging process is often accompanied by unrecognized atypical and complex presentation of illnesses leading to compromised health, function, and well-being with concomitant poor outcomes.

Historically, Diploma and Associate Degree nursing programs have not included gerontological content in educational curricula, and only one-third of baccalaureate nursing programs offer a stand-alone didactic course in gerontological nursing. Consequently, based on these findings from an American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN) report (2010), a logical conclusion would be that approximately two-thirds of baccalaureate prepared nurses may lack the best practice knowledge they need to understand and care for the older adult population. It is essential that baccalaureate programs utilize the *Recommended Baccalaureate Competencies and Curricular Guidelines for the Nursing Care of Older Adults: A Supplement to The Essentials of Baccalaureate Education for Professional Nursing*

Practice (AACN/HIGN, 2010) to drive curricula changes in the education of registered nurses today and in the future. The time has come to propose that academic institutions consider mandating the inclusion of gerontological competencies in nursing education in order to prepare all nurses to care for the rapidly increasing older population.

The AACN has previously noted that only 1% of registered nurses and 3% of advanced practice nurses are certified in gerontological nursing in the United States (U.S.). Although that will change as new graduates enter the workforce following the implementation of the Consensus Model for Advanced Practice Registered Nurse Regulation, the number of advanced practice nurses with gerontological preparation will remain limited. It is essential that nursing education programs include foundational gerontological nursing competencies at the pre-licensure and advanced practice levels. Nurses must be prepared for the critical role that they play in caring for older adults who are the major recipients of nursing care across growing and widely varied health delivery settings. Nursing schools must raise the profile of gerontological nursing to attract new nurses to the field and to create understanding within community healthcare facilities and institutions about the importance of competent, gerontological nursing care. There is a crucial need to be proactive in the approach for moving evidence-based clinical knowledge from the didactic arena into clinical practice settings.

The Administration on Aging (2013) reported that Americans over the age of 65 years make up 13.7% of the population (one in every seven Americans) with anticipated growth that is unprecedented in the history of the U.S. and the world. This rapid expansion, occurring as the “baby boomer generation” began to turn 65 years of age in 2011, will continue through 2030 at which time one in five Americans will be over the age of 65 and these baby boomers will begin turning 85. With this aging trend comes an obligation that nurses understand factors impacting physical, social, psychological and spiritual well-being in older adults, along with complex care needs. This includes specific information about normal physiological age-related changes, chronic illnesses along with the demands of self-management placed on older adults and their care providers, and disabilities that often occur in later years of life, as well as strategies for promoting health, well-being and quality of life.

The report *Retooling for an Aging America* (IOM, 2008), as well as other published reports from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), notes that approximately 80% of older adults have one chronic health condition with 50% having at least two. Furthermore, this same report noted that approximately 20% of Medicare beneficiaries have five or more chronic conditions. It is well known that the Centers for Medicare Medicaid Services (CMS) now hold healthcare institutions accountable for certain adverse events and complications that occur in older Medicare recipients. In 2008, CMS issued a list of health care errors and other preventable events that will no longer be reimbursable as the costs for these complications are considered preventable, including preventable readmissions which are costly to the healthcare system. This is a strong financial indicator that health professionals must be educated in the dutiful, ethical care of this older population.

The AACN noted that approximately 63% of newly licensed registered nurses work predominately with older adults. It has also been reported that older adults receiving care represent 50% of hospital days, 60% of all ambulatory adult primary care visits, 70% of home care visits, and 85% of skilled care facilities residents. It is anticipated that strong job opportunities in clinical practice will be available for providing care to the older population. Nursing today is woefully unprepared to meet the health care challenge

posed by the growing older population, due to the lack of universal educational preparation of these population-specific health-related needs.

Registered Nurses need evidenced-based gerontological nursing knowledge and skills to practice successfully in today's health care environment. Research shows that nurses with this preparation and education deliver measurably improved care leading to better outcomes. Raising the standards of nursing care for older adults through pre-license education and continuing education for practicing nurses will prepare nurses to deliver appropriate care for older adults to age with optimal function, comfort, respectful care, and dignity.

Recommendations for Pre-license Registered Nurse programs (Diploma, Associate, and Baccalaureate):

Recommendation 1: Develop program outcomes and curricula that incorporate the Recommended Baccalaureate Competencies and Curricular Guidelines for the Nursing Care of Older Adults (2010) for teaching gerontological nursing evidence-based practice across didactic and clinical courses.

Recommendation 2: Integrate gerontological nursing learning experiences into interprofessional education opportunities for students across disciplines.

Recommendation 3: Explore strategies for students to minor or specialize in gerontological nursing, such as options for internships or honors programs.

Recommendation 4: Faculty teaching in pre-licensure registered nurse programs (Diploma, Associate, Baccalaureate, Master's) will maintain current preparation and expertise in nursing care of older adults for the courses involving gerontology and to seek national certification in gerontological nursing.

Recommendation 5: All practicing nurses who provide care for older adults in the U.S. will participate in annual gerontological nursing continuing education in order to maintain and enhance competence.

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