

Public Health Nurses Building Resilient Health and Social Ecosystems in the EU

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Abstract

Nurses are the largest professional group in the health sector, mainly being frontline, 24 hours/7 days in a roll, 365 days a year. Nurses are frontline to coordinate care and empower patients and citizens. The present paper is intended at guiding decisions about how public health services can be usefully deployed in the introduction and development of advanced roles for nurses. Advanced roles are seen as the way forward in order to improve access to care and patient outcomes, contain provider related costs and improve recruitment and retention rates through enhanced career prospects. In Poland many nurses developed their skills to deliver high quality of care using the autonomy and independent practice in Primary Health Care. Introducing Advanced Practice Nursing role poses a challenge which is new in Polish health system and it is recommended by nursing authorities such as Polish Nurses Association.

Key words: advanced practice nursing, public health, professional competence, policy, professional autonomy

Słowa kluczowe: pielęgniarstwo zaawansowanej praktyki, zdrowie publiczne, kompetencje zawodowe, polityka, autonomia zawodowa



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European Federation of Nursing Association (EFN) is the authoritative political voice of the nursing profession in the European Union (EU) representing 3 million nurses at the European Institutions, advocating the advancement of nursing to the betterment of health and social care ecosystem – both in terms of recognition of qualifications (Directive 2013/55/EU) [1] and scope of practice. This organization participates in being a sustained priority, culminating in the development of the EFN Workforce Matrix, EFN Competency Framework underpinning article 31 of Directive 55 and the design, together with key alliances, of EU guidelines on Advanced Practice, Prevention and e-Prescribing. These innovations are part of the European Commission Growth Strategy. The outcomes delivered in Poland since EU accession (2004), show the progress nurses made for the society.

Advanced practice is a new way of delivering cost-effective care, which also increases patient access to

experienced healthcare practitioners. For the EFN, an advanced nurse practitioner is authorized for practice at an advanced level of nursing and healthcare delivery, including public health and prevention. Across the developed world, the EFN observes rapid developments of advanced roles for nurses in response to the population's increase and changing healthcare needs that need addressing within restricted budgets [2]. Advanced roles are a way to improve access to care, contain provider related costs and improve nurse recruitment and retention rates through enhanced career prospects [3]. There are also clear patient benefits, since high-quality health and social care relies on a highly educated, dedicated and skilled workforce. Specifically, the promotion of advanced roles for nurses can boost quality, safety and cost-effectiveness of the healthcare delivered [4]. These roles have made an enormous difference for the governance and management of the health and social care ecosystem,

and shown to improve efficiency, enhance patient care and improve patient outcomes; contributing ultimately to the sustainability of the health and social care ecosystem. For example, nurse prescribing is an evolving area of advanced professional development intended to enhance professional capacity and development of new skills that lead to services that are more patient-focused and produce better outcomes.

It is in this context that the Directive, article 31 on nurse competencies in particular, is key to an organized and collective strengthening of the nursing workforce, which has been shown to improve outcomes [5]. With a view to ensuring clear and consistent developments in this area, the EFN members led the development of the EFN Matrix which sets the scene for discussions on the three categories of nursing care, clarifying definitions, competencies and qualifications between the: general care nurse; specialist nurse; and the advanced practice nurse. Knowledge of public health is one of the transversal skills that all nurses are expected to have, next to the importance of eSkills.

Consistent translation of educational requirements described in the Directive is crucial in leveling out variances in quality and safety of healthcare in the EU. To this effect the EFN Competency Framework was developed in collaboration with leading experts in education. It analyses the key nursing competencies expected out of a EU nurse and translates them in a user-friendly guide complete with descriptors for what is to be achieved, the necessary education to be covered in the curricula, and a list of potential learning outcomes that would prove the acquisition of such competences.

A parallel initiative involved the development of Guidelines for Advanced Practice Roles, fully appreciates that changes in education must be accompanied by changes in practice, organization and policy. This guidelines offer an evidence-based pathway to the deployment of eHealth services for the introduction and development of advanced roles. It identifies the key steps to be taken and main issues to be considered. Importantly, it highlights the main context and process factors that are likely to act as barriers and facilitators to the process. The Guideline on Nurse Prescribing is as such a good example of an advanced practice, especially when it comes to combating AMR. The innovation needs to respond to societal challenges confronted with [6].

It is within this context that the Guideline on Prevention plays a crucial role in Public Health. Public health nurses are key within the modernization of the European health and social ecosystems in which community care will get the top location. According to the WHO Public Health “refers to all organized measures (whether public or private) to prevent disease, promote health, and prolong life among the population as a whole. Its activities aim to provide conditions in which people can be healthy and focus on entire populations, not on individual patients or diseases. Thus, public health is concerned with the total system and not only the eradication of a particular disease” [7].

It is important highlighting the general character of public health in which close interprofessional cooperation and collaboration is needed. For the promotion of public health the entirety of the health and social care workforce needs to work together and be able to understand the strengths and limits of each separate profession that is active in the ecosystem. Nurses, physicians, pharmacists, physiotherapists, social workers all contribute in their own different way and with their own different expertise to educating and coaching the public towards healthier life and well-being. However, somebody needs to lead, to manage, to make sure continuity of care is at the centre of integrated care, 24 on 24 hours, 7 on 7 days, 365 days/year [8].

The Polish case can illustrate how nurses with appropriate qualifications are needed for the design of an integrated health and social care ecosystem, in which better promotion of public health is a key milestone. Between 2005 and 2015, over 40.000 nurses in Poland upgraded their level of education, using European Funds (about 170.000.000 PLN), and developed advanced skills to provide care in collaboration with other healthcare professionals such as physicians, and independently as nursing professionals. In the area of Public Health, nurses work independently in many places, and as such comply with art 31 of the European Directive 55. On average each Family Nurse delivers services to 2750 clients in various settings while each public health school nurse takes care of 880 students/pupils.

During last 15 years the budget of MoH spent on developing nurses' skills using CPD reached above 80 million PLN. In Poland there are nurses with high qualifications but without competencies to work with/ in the “Health Team” as an autonomous partner. Since 1999 Poland has been experiencing continuous changes in health care, and today it is time to use nurses' competencies to develop public health policy. Advancing nurses' role in Poland is therefore key to develop cost-effective and high quality services in the entire health and social ecosystem, including the public health sector. Advanced Nurse Practitioners in primary care settings provide care equivalent to that provided by physicians in these settings, which influenced positively the patient satisfaction and empowerment.

Another example are the school nurses, promoters of actions in favor of health protection and promotion, spokespeople for health issues of all the pupils, especially those who are ill and disabled. The school nurse is a coordinator of actions undertaken in favor of pupils' health. The nurse, in the fulfillment of tasks, cooperates with members of the interdisciplinary team. These nurses' independent interventions have taken place for about eighteen years now (this refers to the period of individual contracts with the National Health Fund) and provided the evidence it works well. A school nurse' works autonomously, makes all the decisions independently without any support from physicians, taking full responsibility for nursing care plan, and maintaining health of young people and sometimes fulfilling mothers' role in the new environment.

Over the years we have been observing an increase in the number of school children with health problems. The number of injuries has increased significantly. We have noted an increasing number of posture defects, sight defects, bronchial asthma, and children with child cerebral palsy, diabetes, epilepsy, behavior disorders, ADHD and pupils who overdose pain killers and have contact with drugs. That is why the continuous updating of the nurses' knowledge and upgrading professional qualifications is so important [9].

To conclude, the nursing profession can and will contribute to the EU Growth Agenda and making innovation the solution for the societal challenges we are all confronted with. Governments and policy-makers need to embrace these innovations to build resilient ecosystems for the health and social care sector. Nurses' autonomy, as set out in Directive 55, is the cornerstone for moving towards resilient systems, empowering women to lead change. The EFN sees these developments as pressing, given the increasing and changing health and social needs of EU citizens that demand better ways of organizing and delivering health and social care. Within a context of tighter health and social budgets and rising demands for high-quality and safe care, advanced roles for nurses are the key to making best use of resources and improving outcomes.

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