

The role of nurses in supporting older people to access quality, safe aged care

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KEY STATEMENT

The Australian College of Nursing (ACN) is committed to advancing nurse leadership in the design, governance and provision of high-quality, person-centred and professional aged care. Nurses contribute to planning, delivering and evaluating clinical and other care and lifestyle outcomes in all aged care settings. Nurses have a critical role in providing quality and safe aged care that includes: contributing to clinical governance systems, upholding older peoples' rights to dignity, respect and autonomy and making care decisions consistent with their values and goals; and delivering quality, safe care irrespective of care environment.

KEY FACTS

- Nurses, as part of clinical governance systems, contribute to measuring, monitoring and improving the quality, safety and appropriateness of clinical care.
- Older people are a diverse group whose care needs vary depending on the care environment and their presenting health issues. Care must be personalised to meet the expressed needs of the individual, and in consultation with the individual or family where appropriate.
- Older people have the right to receive quality evidence-based care consistent with their needs.
- Nurses support individual older people and their families to access evidence-based care.
- Enabling older people to participate in their care decisions, undertake self-care and seek help early are core components of safe, quality care.
- Nurses lead and support aged care teams to provide safe, quality care for older people through the application of their knowledge, skills and mentorship. Nurses have a responsibility to continuously reflect on and develop their knowledge and skills.

BACKGROUND

While the Australian population is ageing,¹ most older people care for themselves within the community. However, over time age-related and other factors impact on their health, wellbeing and ability to function independently. Many older people have more than one chronic condition and live with significant self-care, disease and treatment burdens.² Thus, they are at risk of being prescribed potentially/actually inappropriate medicines and of medicine-related adverse events, including unnecessary hospitalisations.

Many older people require polypharmacy to manage their health conditions, some of which are high risk medicines. Thus, they are at risk being prescribe potentially/actually inappropriate medicines and of medicine-related adverse events, including unnecessary hospitalisations. These medicine-related adverse events occur in hospital, residential aged care facilities and community settings, and can contribute to morbidity and mortality. As such, many older people require comprehensive, holistic and high-quality clinical care.

The Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety³ (Royal Commission) found 'the aged care system fails to meet the needs of older, often very vulnerable citizens. It does not deliver uniformly safe and quality care for older people. It is unkind and uncaring towards them.' Counsel assisting's the Royal Commission⁴ made wide ranging proposed recommendations to improve the aged care system to be considered by the Commissioners in the development of the final report due in February 2021.

ACN welcomes the 'whole of system' approach suggested by the Counsel Assisting's, to address deficits identified in over 35 public reviews, innumerable internal reviews, indicator monitoring, studies and consultancies conducted over the past 40 years into the aged care system.⁵ Specifically,

ACN supports the:

- focus on the rights-based approach to care, supported by legislation
- shift towards a system that supports the most vulnerable and marginalised
- emphasis on addressing workforce deficits that influence poor care outcomes
- monitoring of care outcomes through effective clinical indicators
- prioritising strategies for vastly improved quality and safety of aged care provision.

ACN and leading Australian nursing representatives contributed to the Royal Commission and welcome further opportunities to influence policy and the provision of quality and safe aged care into the future.

KEY ISSUES

Clinical governance frameworks support nurses to provide safe, evidence based, cost-effective quality care

Clinical governance is an integrated set of leadership behaviours, policies, procedures, responsibilities, relationships, planning, monitoring and improvement mechanisms implemented to support safe, quality clinical care and positive clinical outcomes for individuals.⁶ Existing care standards, including the National Safety and Quality Health Service Standards (NSQHSS), Aged Care Quality Standards (ACQS) and National Standards for Disability Services (NSDS) define clinical governance systems and frameworks for care provision and outcomes for older people, irrespective of the care environment.

Integral to the success of effective clinical governance systems is the ability for nurses to lead, influence and contribute to the delivery of evidence-based care, and continuously improve care outcomes to support older people's health and wellbeing through monitoring and evaluation. Specifically, nursing leadership is essential in engaging older people in health and aged care design and analysing whether care outcomes reflect the individual's values, rights and needs.

A review into aged care approved providers for the Royal Commission found current clinical governance structures in aged care have failed to support quality care.⁷ Australian aged care can only be improved with a focus on clinical governance systems to ensure monitoring and advancement in care systems, improved cooperation and collaboration between aged care and health care services.

The Royal Commission⁸ identified five themes to improve effectiveness and consistency in the interface between aged and health care systems. These would improve:

- access to primary health for those in aged care
- access to and integration with secondary and tertiary health systems including acute and sub-acute care
- access and integration with palliative care services
- transfer of older people between residential care, hospital, ambulance transfer, rehabilitation and transition care
- key mechanisms and processes needed for the integrated interface between aged care and health care systems, including digital innovation and streamlined data-sharing.

These changes can only be implemented through the provision of quality nursing and interdisciplinary care systems that offer older people both in- and out-reach health services to meet their complex care needs.

Nurses' unique position in providing high-quality evidence-based clinical care and leadership

The spaces where nurses and patients meet become the area where practice develops. (Benner et al. 1999).

Older people have unique needs. Person-centred approaches, clinical governance frameworks and evidence-based care should underpin all care provision for older people. These frameworks will ensure each person's needs are identified and supported; in a way that is responsive to the care environment and best utilises nurses' full expertise and scope of practice.⁹

Nurses play a critical role in promoting healthy ageing.¹⁰ Nurses are best placed to deliver quality and safe clinical care, including advocating for person-centred, culturally safe and respectful care relationships and in supporting the health, wellbeing and independence of older people. Further, nurses are responsible for the supervision and development of unregulated health care workers (UHCWs).¹¹ UHCWs support older people to undertake many of their daily activities, such as personal hygiene, mobilisation, maintaining nutrition and hydration and participating in recreational activities.¹²

A key element of the nurse's role is recognising, preventing and managing deterioration to promote greater functional ability for older people. This element supports the health and wellbeing of the older person and prevents inappropriate or avoidable hospitalisations and early entry into residential care. Nurses have the expertise, through assessment, care planning and interdisciplinary collaboration to identify and manage chronic health issues impacting the wellbeing and longevity of older people such as diabetes, dementia, pain, impaired mobility and nutrition.

Nurses play a significant role in promoting health literacy through education to support the older person to make decisions on their life including advance care planning. Nurses are key to providing appropriate and person-centred palliative care to support the older person and their families at end of life.

RECOMMENDATIONS

ACN advocates for nurse-led evidence-based clinical care and governance in aged care that encompasses:

- personalised, dignified care to determine the individual's needs and preferences *with* the older person; achieving optimal clinical care outcomes consistent with their values, goals and capabilities¹³
- contemporary application of nursing knowledge, skills and capability in multidisciplinary teams of well educated, proficient health care workers to improve outcomes for older people^{14 15}
- relevant clinical guidelines that set standards for evidence-based clinical care as well as identification, monitoring and evaluation for a range of clinical risks, conditions, comorbidities and multimorbidities
- quality indicators to ensure care can be measured, monitored, evaluated and improved.^{16 17}

CONCLUSION

ACN advocates for aged care systems that are nurse-led, person-centred and founded on the highest standards of clinical governance and clinical care. Australia's rapidly ageing population means a nursing workforce equipped to address the increasingly complex health needs of older people is more important than ever. Nurses are best placed to provide older people the high-quality and safe health care they deserve regardless of their care environment, while respecting their rights to dignity and autonomy in determining care pathways and outcomes that reflect their values and needs.

Aged care reforms should be based on both a person-centred approach and evidence-based, contemporary quality standards. This will ensure nurses can effectively and sustainably deliver safe and quality clinical care underpinned by robust clinical governance systems that measure and improve care outcomes for older people.

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