Nursing is one of the most multiskilled professions, which can fill many needs in health care. Besides their scientific knowledge of the diagnosis and treatment of disease, nurses also take on vital functions in planning care, educating and supporting caregivers, assessing and triaging acute needs, providing self-management support, and coordinating with community social and medical resources. Nursing is a career within the health care delivery system that is aimed at providing care for families, communities, and individuals to maintain and sustain optimal quality of life or to recover optimal health.

The field of nursing is broad, with many opportunities, from entry-level practitioners to doctoral-level researchers. Nurses are trained to instruct patients and their families in proper care and to manage and develop nursing care plans, and they help and educate groups and individuals on how to maintain or improve their health. In the United Kingdom and the United States, advanced practice nurses, such as nurse practitioners and nurse specialists, are empowered to diagnose health problems and prescribe therapies and medications to patients, based on specific state regulations.

**Brief History of Nursing**

The history of nursing spans ancient times, 19th-century events, church-sponsored hospitals, the military, schools, and World War I. Nuns and the army often rendered nursing-like services before the origin of modern nursing. Religious bodies, in particular Christian churches, contributed immensely to the advancement of modern nursing. The historian Geoffrey Blainey reiterates that early Christians, notably during an outbreak of measles around 250 C.E. and the smallpox epidemic of 165 to 180 C.E., were eager to nurse the sick and cater to their feeding. It is also recorded that the rapid development of nursing and hospital systems was founded on the practical charity spearheaded by the Christians. Many hospitals were established in the Middle East by the Eastern Orthodox Church before the rise of Islam in the 7th century. The rise of Islam brought about the Islamic tradition of nursing. In the 19th century, nursing experienced unprecedented growth and development.

The foundation of professional nursing was laid by an English nurse, Florence Nightingale, during the Crimean War. Other important nurses who contributed to the development of the nursing profession include Dame Agnes Hunt, the first orthopedic nurse, who initiated the emergence of the orthopedic hospital named Robert Jones & Agnes Hunt Hospital in Shropshire in the United Kingdom; Linda Richards and Agnes Elizabeth Jones, who instituted high-standard nursing schools in Japan and the United States (Linda Richards was America's first officially professionally trained nurse; and Clarissa Harlowe Barton, founder of the American Red Cross, a pioneering American teacher, nurse, humanitarian, and patent clerk. In the early 1900s, the practice of nursing was controlled by medicine. However, with the advent of the modern era, nursing experienced the development of nursing degrees, expansion of the knowledge base of the profession, and increased specialties. Numerous journals to advance the practice of nursing cropped up in research institutes to further improve health services.

**Nursing as a Profession**

Nurses both in the hospital and in community settings improve other functions and augment accessibility to health care services. Registered nurses (RNs) and nurse practitioners improve patient satisfaction and reduce the need for health services in cases of chronic care conditions. The nursing practice is geared toward enhancing quality of life. The aim of the nursing profession worldwide is to guarantee quality care for all while upholding a code of ethics, competencies, standards, continuing education, and certified credentials. Worldwide, the nursing profession is governed, regulated, and defined by law. State and national governments control entry into the nursing profession. Nursing care is undertaken based on the individual's emotional, physical, psychological, spiritual, intellectual, and social needs. Nurses use a holistic approach to render health care for patients from diverse cultural backgrounds and of different ages.

There is an increased national movement to make all nurses have a bachelor of science in nursing. There are many schools of nursing, offering both master's and bachelor's degree programs. One must complete an associate's degree, a bachelor's degree, or a diploma in nursing to be certified as an RN and must also pass the nursing licensure examination for RNs. Those who have satisfied the general requirements of an RN are permitted to undertake study at the master's level and beyond. Advanced-
practice RNs may choose any area of medical specialty, such as obstetrics, oncology, and pediatrics. Advanced-practice nurses, such as nurse practitioners, clinical nurse specialists, nurse-midwives, and clinical RN anesthetists, are some of the highest-paid nurses.

Specialization in a nursing profession may be associated with a health problem (pain management), the type of care (occupational, critical, or palliative), patient age (gerontology or pediatrics), a diagnostic group (orthopedics), the practice setting (school, research institution, or emergency), or a combination of two or more of these. Specialties include those in emergency, gerontology, cardiovascular disease, orthopedics, perianesthesia, critical care, critical care pediatrics, perinatal care, perioperative care, gastroenterology, community health, psychiatric and mental health, rehabilitation, hospice palliative care, medical-surgical, nephrology, neuroscience, enterostomal therapy, occupational health, and oncology nursing.

**Nursing Process and Theory**

The practice of nursing is primarily founded on nursing care. The nursing process is based on stipulated nursing theory that is chosen based on the population served and the care setting. The American Nurses Association defines the nursing process as entailing five steps: (1) evaluation, (2) implementation, (3) planning, (4) diagnosis, and (5) assessment. There are diverse theories that have been postulated in the field of nursing to help manage different health cases. These theories are postulated based on assorted paradigms and philosophical ideas to improve the process of nursing in achieving its ultimate goals.

Nurses are trained to continuously learn the evidence on which nursing practice is based, and they are always updating themselves with the latest technological know-how and new medication information. In America today, the nursing profession is one of the most in-demand and fascinating jobs. About 3.1 million RNs work in an acute care setting in the United States, and an increasing number are engaged in outpatient settings. Moreover, 10.5 percent of hospital-employed nurses work in ambulatory care, and another 10.8 percent work in outpatient clinics. The functions of RNs in ambulatory care are sometimes limited to telephone triage; technical procedures, such as administration of medication and infusion; and patient education.

**See also** Emergency Room Visits; Hospice; Nursing Homes; Outsourcing Medical Services

**Further Readings**


