

## What exactly is a nurse practitioner?

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By Agnes Oblas Special to AFN |

I have been asked on more than one occasion to answer this question: What really is a nurse practitioner? Since this is National Nurse Practitioner Week I thought it fitting to answer this question.

All nurse practitioners start their careers as nurses first. Nurses, like other health care professionals, choose to become nurses because of a need, desire, or calling to minister to those who are ill or ailing.

Our aim is to get to know the patient as a person, as well as a set of symptoms or an illness.

Whether at the hospital bedside or other medical venue we spend more time with patients.

We provide more of the hands-on care from simple monitoring of vital signs to more complex duties performed in emergency rooms, all the while exercising our skills in listening to assess the full context, holistically, of how a patient's medical issues affect his or her family, relationships, work, and life in general.

Nurses who go on to become nurse practitioners use this frame of reference to build upon their experiences and knowledge in nursing and medicine to enhance their interactions with patients in what is called an "expanded" role.

Nurses attain this expanded role by attending graduate school and obtaining graduate degrees in nursing.

These graduate programs prepare nurses to meet the health care needs of patients of all ages by way of comprehensive, advanced-level courses in prevention and treatment of common medical problems and chronic disease states.

Advanced nursing skills, which include physical assessment and diagnosis, allow nurse practitioners to provide primary care and basic specialty care, such as cardiology, dermatology, or gynecology.

Graduates are then eligible to take national board certification exams.

Licensing, by definition, is permission granted by a state board to engage in a particular profession.

Nurse practitioners who are nationally certified in their area of expertise are granted permission by their state board of nursing to practice the level of nursing and medicine, which comprises their expanded role.

Arizona is one state of several across the country where nurse practitioners are additionally allowed to practice their craft independently without the need for any other professional oversight.

Thus, the ultimate responsibility and accountability for the nurse practitioner's actions resides with the nurse practitioner.

Although the concept of nurse practitioner originated in the mid 1960s, and our ranks growing since then, the next few years in health care will see a greater realization that nurse practitioners are an under utilized resource in health care reform.

Dr. Jeff Bauer, PhD, medical economist, medical school professor and consultant to leading providers of health services (most recently at the University of Wisconsin-Madison), is an established expert on key trends that shape the future of health care.

He has evaluated more than 100 studies looking at care provided by both nurse practitioners and physicians. His findings show that nurse practitioners consistently provide high quality and safe care.

Of the approximate 150,000 nurse practitioners now practicing in the United States, almost 3,000 live and work in Arizona.

I hope I have adequately imparted to you a clearer understanding of what a nurse practitioner is.

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