

 Meeting the NMC Standards and Essential Skills Clusters

Transforming Nursing Practice

# What is Nursing?

Exploring Theory and Practice

**Third Edition**

Carol Hall  
Dawn Ritchie

Series editors:  
Shirley Bach and Mooi Standing



# **What is Nursing?**

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Third Edition

Carol Hall  
Dawn Ritchie





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# Foreword

This is a thoughtful and interesting, but most of all practical book, about what it really means to be a nurse. Beginning with a comparison of different definitions of nursing, the authors agree that nursing can be defined differently in diverse settings. They establish that all nursing is, however, influenced by the external effects of changes in society and social reform. They also explain the importance of funding, resources and changing healthcare policy.

The authors delve theoretically and philosophically into what we understand by the term 'being professional', such as the concepts of core values, and the scope and quality of being professional. This leads to a timely discussion on the contemporary images and stereotypes of nurses and nursing students.

One of the many useful facets of this book is the approach taken to applying and understanding nursing theory. Painting pen portraits of major theorists brings this into sharp relief. This emphasis continues by exploring the nurse's role in health promotion and nursing care through integrating what is being learned in the book into examples of what a nurse does. Practical frameworks are used to identify and manage nursing care problems in an accessible and supportive style.

In a creative departure from the usual nursing texts, the authors demonstrate how students can take the opportunity to learn about nursing in other cultures by widening horizons through electives and exchanges. If nursing and healthcare in the twenty-first century must embrace the global concept of health, and the effects of globalisation on worldwide health, what better way is there to understand this than through experiencing healthcare beyond the borders of the UK?

The final part of the book concentrates on life after being a student and the real world of working as a nurse. Again, this takes a refreshing departure from other nursing texts and provides excellent advice, tips and underpinning research on life as a newly qualified nurse. The value of preceptorship and techniques for adapting to being qualified are covered here. The book provides advice on preparing for employment as a qualified nurse – for example, tips on interviewing and finding employment.

The authors explore the real world of working in nursing with detailed commentary from qualified nurses on what it is like to work in the four fields of nursing. This will provide invaluable help for students to plan for their future roles and career options. This book clearly demonstrates what nursing is, and can be, and that learning to be a nurse and qualifying is not the end of a process, but the beginning of a fulfilling and challenging, ever changing profession.

Shirley Bach  
Series Editor

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- *The Nursing Standard*, for permission to reproduce the spider diagram ‘The desired core values of nursing’, as Figure 3.1 on page 42.



# Introduction

Welcome to the new edition of *What is Nursing?* This book aims to offer you a clear introduction to nursing from practical, professional and theoretical perspectives, as well as the reality of 'insider' understanding and experiences of what being a nurse (or a nursing student) means today. The chapters have been written by registered nurses working in nursing education with students, and in nursing practice caring for patients and clients. It has an approachable style, and aims to give you helpful information and learning opportunities as you move towards the profession of nursing, through the use of concept and research summaries, case studies and activities. Whether you are wondering what being a nurse is like and are thinking about applying to university, or are already on a nursing course, or even about to qualify, this book will have something for you.

The early chapters of the book focus on understanding what contemporary nursing is, and how it developed as a profession. They also explore ideas such as coping with your preparation programme, understanding your newly developing role and practice as a nurse with the patients and clients in your care.

The later chapters address topics such as globalisation and international working, becoming qualified and the practical roles of qualified nurses. Although these topics may seem to be of particular interest to nurses who are nearing registration or who are undertaking work abroad, they also offer a clear illustration of what it is like to be a nurse in these situations. For those of you who are new nursing students, or planning to become a member of our profession, having such an opportunity for a sneak preview into the world of qualified practice may inspire. Certainly, such an opportunity allows considerations of some very real challenges and gives you a chance to think about these comfortably and safely in your own time before arriving as a newly qualified practitioner.

## Activities and other learning features

You can read this book from cover to cover if you wish. However, it is primarily a learning tool – with specific features to help you learn and think for yourself. At various stages within each chapter there are points at which you can take a break to undertake activities. Undertaking and understanding the activities is an important element of your understanding of the content of each chapter. You are encouraged, where appropriate, to reflect on your practice and consider how the things you have learned from working with patients might inform your understanding of clinical judgement and decision making. Other activities will require you to take time away from the book to find out new information that will add to your understanding of the topic under discussion. Some activities challenge you to apply your learning to a question or scenario to help you reflect on issues and practice in more depth. A few activities require you to make observations during your day-to-day life or in the clinical setting. All these activities are designed to increase your understanding of the topics under discussion, and to reflect upon how they impact on nursing practice.

Where appropriate, there are suggested or potential answers to activities at the end of the chapter. It is recommended that you try where possible to engage with the activities in order to increase your understanding of the realities of twenty-first century nursing.

There are also concept and research summaries, as well as other reminders of important ideas or definitions, which give you evidence and sometimes offer extra opportunities to further your knowledge and understanding with sources outside the book.

## Overview of chapters

Chapter 1 aims to introduce you to nursing by helping you to develop your knowledge about how nursing has been defined and developed as a modern profession. You are challenged to think about how you perceive nursing today, and also to think about nursing in light of historical development. You will explore the way nursing has changed as the result of legal and professional regulation. You are encouraged to think about your own views and values in respect of nursing work, as you begin to engage with, and commit to, the principles of becoming a nurse.

Chapter 2, a new chapter for this edition, looks at the attitudes of nursing students, and prospective students, to their preparation programme and their chosen career. It includes excerpts from interviews with students who were asked about key areas of concern.

The focus in Chapter 3 explores the image and role of the professional nurse. You are invited to explore key features of what makes a professional identity in nursing and consider the evolution of contemporary images and representations of nursing. You are challenged to think about your values concerning the nurse as a professional, and consider how professional values are set down within *The Code: Standards of Conduct, Performance and Ethics for Nurses and Midwives* (NMC, 2008), and the *Guidance on Professional Conduct for Nursing and Midwifery Students* (NMC, 2010a). The professional role of the nurse will be discussed in respect of care for patients, clients and carers, and also other healthcare professionals across a breadth of settings where nursing care is delivered.

In Chapter 4 you will explore the nurse's caring and therapeutic relationships with patients and clients by examining a number of theoretical ideas about nursing. Nursing as an evidence-based participative activity is introduced and you will explore how nursing activity is constructed, the way that you understand nursing roles and the way in which roles of clients do impact on the way you will deliver care. This is illustrated for you as well as challenging you to think about developing your own examples. Thinking and doing is a core theme in this chapter.

Chapter 5 takes the thinking and doing theme much further. You will consider the 'tools of the trade' for nurses. In this chapter, systematic processes of nursing are identified and you are challenged to think about the way that you might assess client needs and plan, deliver and evaluate the care that you give and determine the effectiveness for recipients. It is essential in nursing to ensure that care given is recorded, so this chapter encourages you to develop your skills in writing and recording information effectively, and to determine measures by which outcomes can be established. The chapter develops your thinking much more about how your knowledge

is needed in order to be able to nurse effectively and looks in more detail at the role of evidence in delivering best practice. Finally, to work effectively you must manage your care within a wider team and this can be arranged in many ways. You are encouraged to think about different approaches to care delivery taken across a variety of care settings.

Nursing and healthcare in the twenty-first century must embrace the global concept of health and the effects of globalisation on worldwide health and Chapter 6 encourages you to widen your knowledge of nursing from the UK to the wider world. You are able to explore opportunities available for developing and enhancing your cultural knowledge and experiences, particularly in respect of nursing in other countries and with other cultures. You will be introduced to material that will help you explore your knowledge, values and beliefs in relation to global health issues.

Chapter 7 looks specifically at what it is like to qualify as a nurse at the end of a nursing preparation programme within a higher education institution. What are the worries and concerns newly qualified nurses have, and how can the various initiatives available help make the transition to a qualified, skilled and practising nurse a smooth one? The chapter works with you to think about getting a job and what it is like to be a qualified nurse and how the role differs from being a student. You are also guided to think about mentoring students and what this might be like.

In Chapter 8, the final chapter of our book, excerpts from group interviews with nurses are used to offer you a real illustration of nursing work in all the main fields of practice in the UK – learning disability, children's, mental health and adult nursing. The nurses talking in the interviews currently work in a range of careers within these fields of practice and share their experiences with you, in order to enable you to understand their work and the benefits (and sometimes challenges) of being a nurse. The aim of the chapter is to help you understand the roles and practices of these nurses in their work and to explore, from their perspective, what it is like to be a qualified nurse today. We do not claim that the sections will cover every element of nursing practice in each field of practice; indeed, that would be impossible to achieve. However, the aim is to address some key and representative elements of practice and give a flavour of the values and concerns of the profession.

## ***NMC Standards for Pre-registration Nursing Education and Essential Skills Clusters***

The Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) has standards of competence that have to be met by applicants to different parts of the nursing and midwifery register. These standards are what the NMC deems as necessary for the delivery of safe, effective nursing practice. As well as specific competencies, the NMC identifies specific skills that nursing students must have at various points of their training programme. These Essential Skills Clusters (ESCs) are essential abilities that students need to attain in order to practise to their full potential.

This book identifies some of the competencies and skills, within the realm of clinical judgement and decision making that student nurses need in order to be entered on to the NMC register. These competencies and ESCs are presented at the start of each chapter so that it is clear which of them the chapter addresses. All of the competencies and ESCs in this book relate to the *generic standards* that all nursing students must achieve. This book includes the latest taken from the *Standards for Pre-registration Nursing Education* (NMC, 2010b).

# Chapter 1

## Defining contemporary UK nursing

*Carol Hall*

### NMC Standards for Pre-registration Nursing Education

As this chapter is concerned with defining contemporary nursing, it will use the generic standards for competence as a baseline.

#### **Domain 1: Professional values**

All nurses must act first and foremost to care for and safeguard the public. They must practise autonomously and be responsible and accountable for safe, compassionate, person-centred, evidence-based nursing that respects and maintains dignity and human rights. They must show professionalism and integrity and work within recognised professional, ethical and legal frameworks. They must work in partnership with other health and social care professionals and agencies, service users, their carers and families in all settings, including the community, ensuring that decisions about care are shared.

#### **Domain 2: Communication and interpersonal skills**

All nurses must use excellent communication and interpersonal skills. Their communications must always be safe, effective, compassionate and respectful. They must communicate effectively using a wide range of strategies and interventions including the effective use of communication technologies. Where people have a disability, nurses must be able to work with service users and others to obtain the information needed to make reasonable adjustments that promote optimum health and enable equal access to services.

#### **Domain 3: Nursing practice and decision making**

All nurses must practise autonomously, compassionately, skilfully and safely, and must maintain dignity and promote health and wellbeing. They must assess and meet the full range of essential physical and mental health needs of people of all ages who come into their care. Where necessary they must be able to provide safe and effective immediate care to all people prior to accessing or referring to specialist services irrespective of their field of practice. All nurses must also meet more complex and coexisting needs for people in their own nursing field of practice, in any setting including hospital, community and at home. All practice should be informed by the best available evidence and comply with local and national guidelines. Decision making must be shared with service users, carers and families

*continued overleaf . . .*



continued . . .

and informed by critical analysis of a full range of possible interventions, including the use of up-to-date technology. All nurses must also understand how behaviour, culture, socio-economic and other factors, in the care environment and its location, can affect health, illness, health outcomes and public health priorities and take this into account in planning and delivering care.

**Domain 4: Leadership, management and team working**

All nurses must be professionally accountable and use clinical governance processes to maintain and improve nursing practice and standards of healthcare. They must be able to respond autonomously and confidently to planned and uncertain situations, managing themselves and others effectively. They must create and maximise opportunities to improve services. They must also demonstrate the potential to develop further management and leadership skills during their period of preceptorship and beyond.

**Chapter aims**

After reading this chapter, you will be able to:

- define nursing from your own understanding and from existing theoretical perspectives;
- understand how nursing has developed as a modern profession and how it is changing today;
- outline some key historical and legislative guidance, and show how it has impacted on the contemporary definition of nursing;
- provide a professional definition of nursing.

# Introduction

This chapter will help you to develop your knowledge about how nursing has been defined and developed as a modern profession. It will challenge you to think of how nursing is perceived by you and by others in light of history, and how nursing has emerged in relation to the way it is defined today. You will also be able to explore examples of the way nursing has developed as the result of legal and professional regulation. This will help you to be aware of the implications of regulation in nursing, as well as to reflect on your own views and values, as you begin to engage with, and commit to, the principles of becoming a nurse. Finally, you will be introduced to material that will consider your role as a nurse in promoting health and in nursing the sick person. There will be an opportunity to explore nursing across a range of patients, including adults, children, those with mental health concerns and individuals who have special learning needs, which may result in a requirement for nursing and social care.

This chapter is intended to underpin and provide context for the remaining chapters of the book, so it is important to expect to see reference made to elements to be found in later chapters. You can follow these references immediately if you wish, in order to develop a specific area of learning, or view them as indicators and return to them later.

## Defining nursing: what do you think?

*Nursing may not be easy to describe, but patients know when they get good nursing and when they do not.*

*Nursing requires a high level set of skills and understanding which taken separately may seem commonplace and undemanding but combined as a whole is far more complex and powerful.*

(Christine Beasley, former Chief Nursing Officer for England (DH, 2006, p4))

In exploring definitions of nursing it is essential to consider your own perspectives and allow these to form part of the context of your thinking. Like the patients described by Beasley (2006) above, it is reasonable to assume that you already have some views from your life experience of what may define a nurse. This chapter will, therefore, begin with your own ideas and then use this backdrop to start comparing the thinking of others.

### Activity 1.1

### Research and evidence-based practice

The Department of Health for the UK employs a team of advisers who consider all areas of nursing and healthcare. The Chief Nursing Officer (CNO) is the Government's most senior nursing adviser. In England, the CNO has responsibility for delivering the Government's strategy for nursing and leads nearly 600,000 nurses, midwives and health visitors and allied health professionals (DH, 2007a). There are also CNOs for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Look up the CNO's page on the Department of Health Website: [www.dh.gov.uk/en/Aboutus/Chiefprofessionalofficers/Chiefnursingofficer/index.htm](http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/Aboutus/Chiefprofessionalofficers/Chiefnursingofficer/index.htm)

Make a note of any recent topics or correspondence accessible from this page. What appear to you to be the most pressing issues for nurses today?

*As what you find will depend on topical developments, there is no outline answer at the end of the chapter.*

Activity 1.2 will enable you to start exploring nursing definitions from your own perceptions. The definition that you create will be referred to as you progress through the chapter and you will be able to develop your own ideas. It may be useful to consider this work for inclusion in your professional portfolio.

**Activity 1.2****Reflection**

From what you already know, think about how you might define a nurse and jot down your own ideas.

Now look at your notes – reflect over the following.

- How did you try to define nursing?
- What do you already know and how has this influenced you?
- Did you try to identify what nurses do, for example: ‘they care for people’?
- Did you try to identify nurses by what they know, for example: ‘they know about medications’ or by their image or attitude or behaviour, for example: ‘they wear a uniform’, ‘they are professional’?

*As this activity is based on your own reflection, there is no outline answer at the end of the chapter.*

You are now beginning to consider the same issues as have been preoccupying some very eminent nurses for many years, and the above exercises may have shown you that nursing is complex and difficult to define. In respect of having a unique body of knowledge usually associated with a profession, this is even more difficult.

Nursing is influenced by where it happens, who is being nursed and by the resources that might be needed and the availability of these. In this chapter, we will explore how nursing is portrayed and defined as the result of existing knowledge around nursing. How nursing as a profession is perceived is also influenced by image and by experience, and these elements will be addressed in more detail in the next chapter. The concept of nursing as a profession will be addressed too. Nursing is finally defined by beliefs and this will be addressed in more detail in Chapter 4, where values, philosophies and models around delivering nursing are considered in more depth.

## Why is having a clear definition of nursing important?

Defining nursing is essential for a number of reasons, and these are succinctly summarised in the Royal College of Nursing (RCN, 2003) document *Defining Nursing*, where the following reasons for a definition of nursing are identified. A definition of nursing enables nurses to:

- describe nursing to people who do not understand it;
- clarify their role in the multidisciplinary healthcare team;
- influence the policy agenda at local and national level;
- develop educational curricula;
- identify areas where research is needed to strengthen the knowledge base of nursing;
- inform decisions about whether and how nursing work should be delegated to other personnel;

- support negotiations at local and national level on issues such as nurse staffing, skill mix and nurses' pay.  
(Adapted from RCN, 2003, p4)

### Activity 1.3

### Critical thinking

Take a critical look at the RCN summary document *Defining Nursing*, which can be found at [www.rcn.org.uk](http://www.rcn.org.uk).

Examine the different definitions that are outlined within it and consider the following questions.

- Do you agree with the final statement that is drawn?
- Does the paper describe nursing for everyone?
- Are there any limitations of this definition?

After reading this paper, try to think of how you would now describe nursing to a friend who does not know what it is. Jot down your ideas in about 5–6 key words. Have your original ideas changed?

*As this activity is based on your own reflection, there is no outline answer at the end of the chapter.*

### Concept summary: What is the Royal College of Nursing?

The Royal College of Nursing (RCN) is a UK-wide 'professional organisation' for nursing. This means it is a non-profit-making membership organisation that seeks to further the profession of nursing and act in supporting its members in their relationships with employers. The RCN develops professional documents and journals for nursing, arranges conferences to share nursing knowledge, and consults members to lobby the Government, and other organisations, to improve nursing. It also works with the International Council of Nurses (ICN) and the World Health Organization (WHO) to represent UK interests in the global nursing arena. The RCN also acts as a union for its members. Unite/Amicus and UNISON are also trade unions that represent nurses. For more information on all these organisations, visit [www.rcn.org.uk](http://www.rcn.org.uk), [www.icn.ch](http://www.icn.ch), [www.who.int](http://www.who.int), [www.unison.org](http://www.unison.org) and [www.amicustheunion.org](http://www.amicustheunion.org).

It is important to recognise that the RCN is not the only group that has tried to define nursing, and while *Defining Nursing* makes a useful contribution to British thinking, nursing is carried out globally and it is important to think of nursing across countries as well as within them. The RCN's ideals are identified as being commensurate with a wider definition of nursing globally, which is addressed by the International Council of Nurses (ICN):

*Nursing encompasses autonomous and collaborative care of individuals of all ages, families, groups and communities, sick or well and in all settings. Nursing includes the promotion of health, prevention of illness and the care of ill, disabled and dying people. Advocacy, promotion of a safe environment, research, participation in shaping health policy, and in patient and health systems management, and education are also key nursing roles. (ICN, 2010)*

For the purposes of this book, the above definition will be used, because it clearly includes some of the elements of nursing that the NMC wants to ensure you develop and these are addressed more explicitly than in the RCN definition. It is also a useful tool when considering European and international nursing in Chapter 6 of this book. However, the RCN definition and those of others in the UK are commensurate and compatible with the ICN definition.

## The role of regulators in defining nursing

The Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) was established in accordance with UK law under The Nursing and Midwifery Order 2001(SI 2002/253) (HM Government, 2002) and came into existence on 1 April 2002, taking over from a previous regulatory body known as the United Kingdom Central Council for Nursing and Midwifery (UKCC).

The NMC is a ‘professional regulator’ for nursing. This means that it acts to safeguard the health and well-being of the public by regulating, reviewing and promoting nursing and midwifery standards. The NMC is monitored by the Charity Commission and by the Council for Healthcare Regulatory Excellence (CHRE).

To achieve its aims, the NMC (2010a):

- maintains a register of all nurses and midwives and ensures that they are properly qualified and competent to work in the UK;
- sets the standards of education, training and conduct that nurses and midwives need to deliver high quality healthcare consistently throughout their careers;
- ensures that nurses and midwives keep their skills and knowledge up to date and uphold the standards of their professional code;
- ensures that midwives are safe to practise by setting rules for their practice and supervision;
- has fair processes to investigate allegations made against nurses and midwives who may not have followed the code.

You should note that, in addition to formal definitions of nursing, as the regulator of nurses in the UK, the NMC also has positions on the way that nurses are prepared for practice and on the roles that nurses play. This will be addressed much more thoroughly in relation to the concept of a professional included in Chapter 2. However, it should be recognised that the regulators have a defining concern with what nurses do, in ensuring safe, high-quality and ethically sound care for the public once registered, rather than being concerned with a definition of nursing in its broader sense.

The NMC translates the broader definitions of nursing into the practicalities of what nurses must do through identified standards for professional practice. These include the NMC *Standards for*

*Pre-registration Nursing Education* (NMC, 2010a) which outline proficiencies for achievement in order to register. The NMC has also identified Essential Skills Clusters (ESCs) for nursing (NMC, 2010b) which address very particularly what nursing students completing pre-registration programmes within the UK must be assessed as doing safely in order to register.

#### Activity 1.4

#### Research and reflection

Put yourself in the NMC's position for a moment. What do you think would be 'essential' skills for all nurses to learn?

Now use the NMC website ([www.nmc.org.uk](http://www.nmc.org.uk)) to identify the skills you will need to learn in order to achieve the ESCs as prescribed by the NMC.

- Do these match the ones you thought of?
- Are there any more essential skills you think should be included in addition to these?
- Do they help to define what nurses should do?

*As this activity is based on your own reflection, there is no outline answer at the end of the chapter.*

## How the law defines nursing

Nursing also has to meet some defining criteria established by law. This includes both national and international statute, and there may be variance in definitions across and between countries in order to accommodate national law.

National law has three major purposes: that of professional regulation as defined above in relation to the NMC; that of civil or common law (tort) related to ensuring a duty to care; and finally that of criminal law in enforcing legally acceptable behaviour by nurses.

### Concept summary: Criminal law and civil law – what is the difference?

#### *Civil law*

This is legislation that is used to settle disputes; i.e., it is used to claim for damages. The claimant is the person or body who has been 'harmed' and the defendant is the person or body who has to prove that they were not liable for the harm caused. The outcome of a successful civil case may be payment of damages by the defendant or an injunction against them. Civil law is applicable to all instances that involve patient care. If you are an employer you may also be liable for any harm that may come to your staff while they are in your employment.

### **Criminal law**

This is legislation that is used by the state to enforce behaviour; i.e., it is legislation that, if contravened, generally results in the state becoming the prosecutor and a defendant, if found guilty, receiving either imprisonment, a community penalty or a fine.

*(Adapted from McHale and Tingle, 2007, pp2–3)*

All nurses (and indeed all health carers) have a duty of care to their patients that upholds the rights of patients to receive care from nurses that is carried out appropriately by personnel who have the skills to perform care safely and effectively.

But what is meant by ‘safely’ and ‘effectively’? It is often hard when you go into practice to work out what you can do and what you cannot. This is especially so when you are new to nursing as a student. While many other influences might dictate whether or not you can or cannot do different aspects of practice (local policies, your mentor’s guidance, your university’s rules), in law, the consideration of this definition of nursing is much wider. Specific tasks (such as whether you can collect a patient from the operating theatre) are not included, but they are addressed broadly in identifying that, if you carry out an activity, then you must be competent to do so. The main points of civil law relate mostly to what might be considered as negligence.

Cox (2006) identifies that if, as you perform your work as a nurse, things go wrong, in a court of law you would be judged against the standard reasonably expected from any other ordinarily competent nurse carrying out that particular task. No excuse can be made for inexperience, because if you cannot carry out the task, you should not take it on and, further, your mentor or employer should not let you. This does not suggest, however, that your mentor or employer is entirely accountable for your actions. While they do make decisions about delegating nursing tasks and hold some accountability for this, you have an accountability too in taking the task on in the first place under the duty of care for your patient. Further, you must carry out any care you give to a reasonable standard, and there is no excuse for poor basic standards that compromise the quality or safety of care given. This is illustrated graphically in the report of the Mid Staffordshire Inquiry, where Robert Francis QC recommends ‘a duty of candour’ supporting the need for whistleblowing by professionals who experience poor care (Francis, 2013).

In respect of criminal law, nurses have a duty to be law-abiding and this means being aware of the legal requirements of being a British citizen generally. When you qualify as a nurse, the NMC requires your university to declare your honesty and integrity, thus identifying that, in their opinion, you are a suitable person to enter the profession. During your time on a nursing course, you must also develop your own understanding of a wide range of legislation as it applies to nursing. You will be introduced to the law and the many ways it defines your roles as a nurse as you go through your programme of study, but here is a short case study to get you started in your thinking.