

Definition of 'Nursing' and a 'Nurse'

The International Council of Nurses (ICN), representing over 29 million nurses worldwide, recognizes the critical importance of globally relevant, contemporary definitions of 'nursing' and a 'nurse'. The definitions, endorsed by ICN in June 2025, articulate the identity and responsibility of the profession, support public understanding, inform national regulation, and enable alignment across jurisdictions and health systems.^{1 2}

Nursing is a dynamic, knowledge-based profession grounded in ethical values, therapeutic relationships, and a commitment to improving health for all people.^{3 4 5 6} It upholds the right of every person to enjoy the highest attainable standard of health and contributes to this by promoting health, preventing illness, restoring dignity, and strengthening health systems.^{7 8 9}

The definitions position nurses as autonomous, accountable professionals who collaborate with individuals, families, communities, and other health professionals.^{3 10 11} They recognize nursing contributions across domains, including direct care, education, informatics, policy, research, humanitarian response, and leadership.^{7 12 13}

The definitions emphasize that nursing continues to evolve in response to system transformation, demographic shifts, technological innovation, and global health needs.^{7 14 15} These definitions highlight the breadth and impact of nursing practice, and reinforce its central role in health systems worldwide.^{7 16 17}

ICN recognizes that:

- Nursing is a distinct, regulated profession grounded in scientific and humanistic knowledge, ethical practice, and a commitment to people-centred care.^{11 18 19 20}
- A nurse is a legally authorized and educated individual who applies this knowledge across roles and settings to enhance health outcomes and uphold human dignity.^{11 21 19}
- Modern nursing practice includes health promotion, illness prevention, clinical care, service leadership, research, advocacy, education, and system-wide change.^{7 13 22}
- Regulation of nursing should be profession-led, legally embedded, and responsive to changes in practice environments, workforce capability, technologies, and public needs.^{23 24 21}

- Clear definitions of ‘nursing’ and ‘nurse’ strengthen the visibility and legitimacy of the profession, confirming its role in public safety, health equity, and the realization of the right to health.^{7 8 22}

Principles that underpin these definitions are that:

- Nursing has a social contract with the community, through which it commits to delivering safe, competent, ethical, and accountable care in service of the public good.^{25 19 11}
- Nursing is both a science and an art, centred on the person. It integrates evidence-informed knowledge, ethical values, and therapeutic relationships in all aspects of practice.^{6 5 10 26}
- Nursing requires clear, consistent, and enforceable regulatory frameworks, including licensing, scopes of practice, education standards, and professional codes, to ensure public protection and professional integrity.^{23 21 24 11}
- Nursing is a dynamic profession that supports individuals, families, and communities from birth to end of life, through both generalist and specialist roles across diverse domains of practice.^{27 3 7}
- Nursing is a global profession with a shared foundation that applies across all countries. It must be clearly defined to ensure consistency while allowing for context-specific implementation.^{7 1 28}
- Nursing must remain robust and responsive, with principles that support growth, innovation, and adaptation to evolving health needs and societal expectations.^{7 14 15}
- Nursing is both autonomous and collaborative, requiring professional judgement and accountability in working with individuals, families, communities, and other health professionals to provide safe, ethical, person-centred care.^{19 29 30 31}

The ICN definitions of ‘nursing’ and ‘a nurse’ are intended for use in:

- Supporting legislation, regulation, and professional standards, including scopes of practice, conduct, and education requirements.^{21 23 24}
- Guiding the development or reform of regulatory systems in countries where frameworks are not yet established or need modernization.^{23 7 24}
- Informing decisions in areas of regulatory ambiguity, such as digital care, advanced practice, climate-responsive health, and leadership roles.^{32 21 13}

- Supporting integration into digital health, electronic systems, and nursing informatics tools to enhance clinical decision-making and regulatory compliance.³²
33
- Enabling consistency in nursing roles across borders and contributing to international workforce mobility.^{7 24 12}
- Promoting a shared global understanding of the nursing profession's breadth, societal contribution, and regulatory accountability.^{1 22 11}

ICN recommends that:

1. Governments, regulatory authorities, and policymakers adopt the ICN definitions into law, policy, and regulatory instruments.^{21 23 24}
2. National Nursing Associations use the ICN definitions to promote nursing leadership, visibility, and resourcing across health, workforce, education, and policy sectors.^{1 13 12}
3. Educators and regulators apply the ICN definitions when developing scopes of practice, curricula, credentialing frameworks, and continuing professional development standards.^{18 29 21}
4. Global health institutions integrate the ICN definitions into strategic planning, workforce data, and international policy to ensure alignment and visibility.^{7 22 24}
5. All stakeholders use the ICN definitions to foster public trust, interprofessional respect, and policy coherence in nursing governance and delivery.^{19 11 13}

The ICN definitions are a foundation for recognising and regulating the nursing profession. They reflect both the enduring values of nursing and its continued growth across care, technology, advocacy, leadership, and education.^{3 5 7 32}

Their application:

- Provides a foundation to support the recognition of nursing as a profession with a protected title, defined scope of practice, legal accountability, and ethical obligations, particularly where the definitions are adopted into national regulatory or legislative frameworks.^{11 21 23 24}
- Enables consistent approaches to the authorization, education, and deployment of nurses across jurisdictions and sectors.^{7 18 21}
- Facilitates international collaboration, workforce mobility, and global efforts to ensure quality, safety, and equity in nursing care.^{7 24 22 16 17}



Adopted in 2026

References

¹ Williamson L (2023). *The Global Voice of Nursing, A history of the International Council of Nurses from 1899 to 2022*. ICN, Geneva.

² International Council of Nurses (1947). *Constitution*, <https://www.icn.ch/sites/default/files/inline-files/ICN%20Constitution%202019.pdf>. Accessed 23.03.2026

³ Henderson V (1991). *The Nature of Nursing. A definition and its implications for practice, research, and education. Reflections after 25 years*. NLN Publ. Nov. (15–2346): vii–xi, 1 PMID: 1780233.

⁴ Orlando IJ (1961). *The dynamic nurse patient relationship. Function, process and principles*. New York, NY: G. P. Putnam's Sons.

⁵ Watson J (1979). *Nursing: The philosophy and science of caring* Pub: Little Brown.

⁶ Carper B (1979). *Nursing: The philosophy and science of caring* 1(1) 13–23.

⁷ World Health Organization (2021). *The WHO global strategic directions for nursing and midwifery (2021–2025)*. Available at: <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240033863>. Accessed 23.03.2026

⁸ United Nations (1966). *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*. General Assembly resolution 2200A (XXI). Available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-economic-social-and-cultural-rights>. Accessed 23.03.2026

⁹ World Health Organization (n.d.). *Nursing and Midwifery*. Available at: https://www.who.int/health-topics/nursing#tab=tab_1. Accessed 23.03.2026

¹⁰ Benner P & Wrubel J (1989). *The Primacy of Caring*. Addison–Wesley, Menlo Park, Ca.

¹¹ Australian Council of Professions (2003). "What is a Profession?" Available at: <https://professions.org.au/what-is-a-professional/>. Accessed 23.03.2026

¹² International Council of Nurses (2022). *Sustain and Retain in 2022 and Beyond*. Available at: <https://www.icn.ch/resources/publications-and-reports/sustain-and-retain-2022-and-beyond> Accessed 23.03.2026

¹³ Salvage J & White J (2019). Nursing leadership and health policy: everybody's business. *Int Nurs Rev*.doi:10.1111/inr.12523.

¹⁴ Thorne S (2023). On the misguided search for a definition of nursing. *Nursing Inquiry*, 30(4), e12610. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/nin.12610>. Accessed 23.03.2026

¹⁵ Fawcet, J (2024). More thoughts about the evolution of the metaparadigm of nursing: Addition of culture as another metaparadigm concept and definitions of all the concepts. *Nursing Science Quarterly*, 37(2), 183–184.

¹⁶ Aiken L, Clarke S, Sloane D, Sochalski J & Silber J (2002). Hospital nurse staffing and patient mortality, nurse burnout, and job dissatisfaction. *JAMA* 288 (16) 1987–1993.

¹⁷ McHugh M, Aiken L, Sloane, S, et al (2021). Effects of nurse-to-patient ratio legislation on nurse staffing and patient mortality, readmissions, and length of stay. *The Lancet* May 22;397(10288):1905–1913. doi: 10.1016/S0140-6736(21)00768-6. Epub 2021 May 11.

¹⁸ Fitzpatrick J & McCarthy G (2014). *Theories Guiding Nursing Research and Practice: Ch 1: The Discipline of Nursing*. Available at: <https://connect.springerpub.com/content/book/978-0-8261-6405-6/part/part01/chapter/ch01>. Accessed 23.03.2026

¹⁹ International Council of Nurses (2021). *The ICN Code of Ethics*. Available at: https://www.icn.ch/sites/default/files/2023-06/ICN_Code-of-Ethics_EN_Web.pdf. Accessed 23.03.2026

²⁰ McCormack B, McCance T, Bulley C, Brown D, et al. (2021). *Fundamentals of PersonCentred Healthcare Practice* Wiley: London.

²¹ Australian Department of Health and Ageing (2024). *Unleashing the Potential of our Health Workforce – Scope of Practice Review*. Available at: <https://www.health.gov.au/our-work/scope-of-practice-review>. Accessed 23.03.2026

²² All Party–Parliamentary Group on Global Health (2016). *Triple Impact: how developing nursing will improve health, promote gender equity and support economic growth*. Available at: <https://www.globalhealthpartnerships.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/DIGITAL-APPG-Triple-Impact-3.pdf>. Accessed 23.03.2026

²³ World Health Organization (2024). *World Health Organization Guidance on Health Practitioner Regulation: An Overview*. Available at: <https://meridian.allenpress.com/jmr/article/110/3/5/503774/World-Health-Organization-Guidance-on-Health>. Accessed 23.03.2026

²⁴ International Labour Organization (2005). Preamble to Nursing personnel convention, 1977 (No. 149). ILO.

²⁵ Fry–Bowers E & Hylton Rushton C (2023). Re–imagining nursing’s social contract with the public. Available at: <https://www.myamericannurse.com/re-imagining-nursings-social-contract-with-the-public/>. Accessed 23.03.2026

²⁶ McCormack B (2022). Person–centred care and measurement: The more one sees, the better one knows where to look. *J Health Serv Res Policy* Apr;27(2):85–87. doi: 10.1177/13558196211071041:

²⁷ Bates RA, Blair LM, Schlegel EC, McGovern CM, et al. (2018). Nursing Across the Lifespan: Implications of Lifecourse Theory for Nursing Research. *J Pediatr Health Care*. 2018 Jan–Feb;32(1):92–97. doi: 10.1016/j.pedhc.2017.07.006. Epub 2017 Sep 7. PMID: 28888348; PMCID: PMC5726902.

²⁸ Royal College of Nursing (2024). ‘Definition and Principles of Nursing’ Available at: <https://www.rcn.org.uk/Professional-Development/Definition-and-principles-of-nursing>. Accessed 23.03.2026

²⁹ Nursing and Midwifery Board of Australia (2007). A national framework for the development of decision–making tools for nursing and midwifery practice. Available at: <https://www.nursingmidwiferyboard.gov.au/codes-guidelines-statements/frameworks.aspx>. Accessed 23.03.2026

³⁰ Havard M, et al. (2024). Defining digital nursing. *British Journal of Nursing*, 33(2), 72–77.

³¹ Ahonen, O., et al. (2023). The biomedical and health informatics recommendation domains in relation to the nurse competence scale categories. *Studies in Health Technology and Informatics*, 305, 216–219.

Further Reading

ICN (2025). *Renewing the Definitions of 'Nursing' and 'a Nurse': Global Consultation Report*. Geneva: ICN. <https://www.icn.ch/resources/publications-and-reports/renewing-definitions-nursing-and-nurse>