

Primary health care

Primary health care (PHC) is essential for building resilient, sustainable health systems that ensure health for all, and the nursing profession is at the forefront of this effort. The International Council of Nurses (ICN) fully supports and endorses the term Primary Health Care (PHC) as defined by the World Health Organization (WHO) which states: *“PHC is a whole-of-society approach to health that aims at ensuring the highest possible level of health and well-being and their equitable distribution by focusing on people’s needs and as early as possible along the continuum from health promotion and disease prevention to treatment, rehabilitation and palliative care, and as close as feasible to people’s everyday environment”*.¹

Nurses play a critical role in developing high-performing, safe, appropriate, and sustainable PHC systems. PHC is a comprehensive, principle-based framework designed to guide the delivery of services to maximize health outcomes and equity by focusing on the needs and preferences of individuals, families, and communities across the entire continuum of care—from health promotion and disease prevention to treatment, rehabilitation, and palliative care.² This approach prioritizes the creation of conditions that advance the health and well-being of all people, with a central focus on placing the individuals receiving care at the core of all health service delivery. ICN agrees with this approach, but in practicality, many health systems differ in their application of PHC. Thus, this position statement describes PHC, the means for addressing health promotion and well-being, as the core component of a comprehensive health system.

The global commitment to PHC began with the 1978 Alma-Ata declaration, which was reaffirmed in 2018 with the Astana Declaration. The world continues to recognise that strengthening PHC is the most inclusive, effective and efficient way to achieve universal health coverage (UHC).³ In the 2023 United Nations Political Declaration on UHC, Heads of State and world leaders committed to using a PHC approach to accelerate progress towards UHC by 2030.⁴

The core principles of PHC are universal access; solidarity and equity; holistic approach; multisectoral policy and action; community engagement to co-create health; and high-quality, affordable care.² PHC encompasses three inter-related and synergistic core components:⁵

- 1) Primary care and essential public health functions as the core of integrated health services;
- 2) Addressing the broader determinants of health through multisectoral policy and action;
- 3) Empowering individuals, families and communities to take charge of their own health.

While PHC and primary care are interconnected concepts, they are distinct. Primary care serves as the central focus and an essential component of PHC, translating its principles and driving its goals. It represents the first point of contact for accessing, maintaining continuity, and coordinating comprehensive health and social services, effectively addressing most health needs close to where people live and work.⁵

PHC provides an integrated range of services and care that are sustainable, accessible, equitable, safe, of high quality, efficient, acceptable, affordable, people- and community-centered, gender-sensitive and reflective of locally appropriate solutions. These crucial services include vaccination; screening; prevention, control and management of communicable and non-communicable diseases; care and services that promote, maintain and improve maternal, newborn, child and adolescent health; mental health; and sexual and reproductive health.³

There is robust evidence that supports the correlation between high-functioning PHC and significantly improved health outcomes, particularly from chronic conditions. PHC is linked to lower mortality rates, improved quality of life, effective illness prevention and improved patient experiences and reduced social disparities.^{5,6} In low- and middle-income countries, scaling up PHC could save 60 million lives and increase average life expectancy by 3.7 years by 2030.⁷ PHC-oriented health systems emphasize a holistic, preventive approach to care that promotes health and well-being, shifting the focus away from reactive illness treatment. PHC is essential to address public health emergencies, both in terms of managing unexpected surge capacity and the ability to maintain services for all, and countries with stronger PHC systems have been shown to respond faster and more effectively to public health emergencies.^{8,9}

PHC requires collaborative and coordinated efforts of government departments, service providers, non-governmental organizations, academics and community members of all sectors, including housing, education, transport, social welfare and beyond, as these all strongly influence health outcomes.⁴ PHC also plays a vital role in addressing the health impacts of climate change and mitigating the negative environmental effects of health systems.

Nurses are essential to the effective realization of PHC. They make up the largest segment of the healthcare workforce and are responsible for delivering services across all settings. Nurses provide critical links between individuals, families, communities, the healthcare system, and beyond.

Key components of nursing practice, such as ensuring equitable access to health services, individual and community participation in care, and a focus on health promotion and disease prevention, are also notable features of comprehensive PHC. As nurses have a central role in care coordination and holistic approach to care delivery, they are ideal leaders in comprehensive multidisciplinary teams to achieve effective PHC.

Nurse-led models of care, including nurse-led clinics and vaccination programs, enhance the accessibility, quality, and affordability of PHC interventions. In particular, Advanced Practice Nurses (APNs) play a crucial role in creating sustainable, efficient, and effective healthcare systems. With their advanced education and experience, APNs provide care in a variety of settings, promoting timely access, continuity of care, and improved patient experiences.¹¹ Digital technologies are increasingly vital in supporting PHC, and nurse-led models are harnessing these technologies for information management, care coordination, patient safety, accessibility, and in responding to health emergencies.^{12,13}

Investment and optimisation of nursing, particularly in roles closer to where people live, will enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of health systems, ensuring they deliver accessible, safe, affordable, people-centered care.

International Council of Nurses' position and recommendations

As the global voice of nursing, ICN:

- Endorses the Astana Declaration and strongly agrees that strengthening PHC is the most inclusive, effective and efficient approach to enhance people's physical and mental health and social wellbeing and that PHC is a cornerstone of a sustainable health system to achieve UHC.
- Recognizes that PHC requires care teams that demonstrate coordinated teamwork, interprofessional collaboration, an appropriate skill mix and with health professionals working to their optimal scope of practice.
- Strongly believes that nurse-led models of care have an unprecedented opportunity to improve the accessibility, quality, safety, and affordability of health care services for PHC.
- Believes that care coordination led by nurses is an effective and evidence-based solution that exemplifies and contributes to PHC.
- Believes that strategic planning and investment in education, life-long learning, and leadership development for nurses is critical to building the nursing workforce integral to PHC.
- Maintains that the effectiveness and efficiency of PHC is dependent on a nursing workforce that is respected and protected and that ensuring health worker safety is critical for the success of PHC.
- Believes that strengthening PHC requires an equitably distributed and sustainable nursing workforce that is aligned with population and community health needs and prepared for practice across community settings and the health care system.
- Believes that developing and building Advanced Practice Nursing roles will increase the domestic supply of professionals who are likely to be able to provide culturally competent PHC in the context of the local community.
- Calls for addressing key issues in the transitions of care to be included in any reform to PHC.

ICN encourages national nurses' associations (NNAs) to:

- Support the nursing profession and other disciplines to understand and promote the roles and responsibilities of nurses delivering PHC.
- Contribute to developing, enhancing, and supporting nurse-led care coordination models alongside leaders of health care systems.
- Advocate for national policies that promote functional multidisciplinary teams, investment in interprofessional learning and governance and funding models that support team-based care.
- Promote the use of digital technology in nurse-led models of care to support PHC.
- Contribute to national policies, strategies, and plans across all sectors and collaborate with other stakeholders to help build strong and sustainable PHC systems.
- Advocate for continued, sustainable investment in PHC at the national level.
- Advocate for high-quality pre- and post-registration education to enable the nursing workforce to continue to deliver effective PHC-oriented care.
- Consider professional standards and competencies related to care coordination.
- Advocate for integration of competencies required to engage patients as partners in care and the process of shared decision-making into nursing education.
- Support interprofessional education and advocate for health professionals to develop the competencies and attributes required for inter-professional practice.

ICN calls on governments and/or global health organizations to:

- Commit to strengthening PHC through implementation of the Astana Declaration and actualize this commitment through valuing and prioritizing investment towards PHC. Investment in PHC should increase by at least 1% of gross domestic product.¹⁴
- Enable nurses to work to their full scope of nursing practice by strengthening and modernizing regulation.

- Create decent work and appropriate compensation for nurses and other health workers working at the primary care level, as set out in the Astana Declaration.
- Actively and meaningfully engage national nursing associations as critical partners in policy setting and decision-making.
- Commit to increasing the domestic supply of nurses for the workforce and adhere to the WHO Global Code of Practice on the International Recruitment of Health Personnel.¹⁵
- Adopt policies that recognize, support and compensate advanced practice nurses to improve access to quality, safe and affordable health services and optimize PHC.
- Develop, resource and implement a national strategic nursing/health workforce plan to achieve optimal PHC. Strategic planning must include analysis, forecasting and planning of the nursing workforce supply and demand based on population health needs; review of scope of practice and roles, removing barriers where necessary to make optimal use the nurses' scope and role; and the development of multidisciplinary teams.
- Ensure equitable distribution of resources for PHC across urban and rural areas and implement measures targeting education, personal and professional support, adequate and timely remuneration, as well as adequate working and living conditions to recruit and retain the health workforce in remote, rural and socially deprived urban areas.⁵
- Increase the voice of nurses in policy development and high-level decision making for PHC.

ICN calls on individual nurses in their roles as clinicians, educators, managers, researchers, policy influencers or executives to:

- Promote and raise public awareness of multidisciplinary team-based care models that increase the effectiveness and value of PHC.
- Pursue opportunities to assume greater responsibility for leading PHC service planning, delivery, monitoring and evaluation.
- Engage in continuing education and professional development to deliver strengthen and extend scope of practice.

- Promote the scope and functions of nurses amongst all members of the healthcare team to develop a greater understanding and support of the full breadth of the nurse's role in PHC.
- Continue to review nursing education programs to meet the health care needs of communities being served to better prepare and attract students to work in a wide array of settings utilizing a PHC approach.
- Support individuals and communities to use digital health which can support them to identify their health needs, participate in the the planning and delivery of their own care and to feel empowered to take the lead in maintaining their own health and wellbeing.
- Provide high-quality nursing placements for undergraduate and postgraduate students across the entire continuum of care including, but not limited to, aged care, primary care, schools and other community health settings to support the realization of integrated health services.
- Improve individuals' and communities' awareness and understanding of care coordination and how it might affect their treatment and participation in health care.
- Carry out research on the contribution of nurse-led models of care, nursing scope of practice, and advanced nursing roles to strengthen PHC.
- Contribute to establishing, maintaining and continuously improving a patient safety culture and enacting patient safety principles in daily practice.

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