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The American Academy of Ambulatory Care Nursing (AAACN) is the specialty nursing organization for nurses practicing in ambulatory care settings. AAACN is responsible for establishing and maintaining the standards for ambulatory care professional nursing practice. Ambulatory care is defined as outpatient care in which individuals stay less than 24 hours in the health care environment and are then discharged to their residential situation following the care episode.

This publication is an updated scope of practice statement and 16 revised standards for the clinical and administrative professional practice of ambulatory care registered nurses (RNs). The standards promote effective clinical and administrative management of increasingly complex ambulatory care RN roles and responsibilities in a changing health care environment.

This publication may be used to:

1. Provide guidance to outpatient care systems for the development of structure and processes in the delivery of ambulatory care nursing (e.g., policies, procedures, role descriptions, and competencies).
2. Guide the delivery of quality nursing care for patients, populations, and communities.
3. Facilitate the development of professional nursing knowledge in ambulatory care.
4. Facilitate the evaluation of professional nursing performance as evidenced in performance appraisals, peer reviews, and reflective practice.
5. Stimulate participation in research and evidence-based practice.
6. Guide performance improvement initiatives in clinical and organizational environments.
7. Guide ethical practice and patient advocacy.
8. Serve as a tool to advance ambulatory care professional nursing practice, patient health states, and the performance outcomes of ambulatory care health care institutions.

The scope of practice statement addresses the definition and unique characteristics of ambulatory care nursing, the conceptual framework, its history over the past 30 years, the diverse types of ambulatory care settings, the roles of ambulatory care RNs, the trends and issues in ambulatory care and future directions. The standards specify the competencies needed for professional clinical and administrative practice. Together, the scope and the standards provide a structure for cataloguing and unifying the distinct nurse-patient interactions and organizational activities that occur in diverse ambulatory care environments.

Overview of the AAACN Standards 9th Edition

In 1987, AAACN published the first edition of the standards. That document contained the landmark standards for professional ambulatory care nursing and administration. It outlined, for the first time, a definition, philosophy, and standards reflecting the unique ambulatory care nursing environment.

Ambulatory care nursing is dynamic – changing and expanding to meet the health care needs of the populations served, along with the demands of institutions delivering care. Inspired by the visions, values, and traditions of the past, these standards reflect current professional norms, practices, and expectations. The standards recognize the evolving landscape of professional practice by regular review with needed revisions since 1987, ensuring usefulness, relevancy, accuracy, and measurable outcomes. The standards are now in their 9th edition.

This set of revisions represents the work of the Scope and Standards of Practice for Professional Nurses Task Force members who conducted a broad scope of activities from September 2015 to December 2016. The task force members searched a broad base of literature for knowledge and evidence and consulted with nurses practicing in diverse organizational settings. Recognized ambulatory care nurse leaders provided additional input through reviews and comments.

The 9th edition of the *Scope & Standards of Practice for Professional Ambulatory Care Nursing* contains some significant revisions from previous versions.

In addition to the revised scope of practice, this publication contains 16 standards. The first six address the phases of the nursing process; the last ten standards address professional performance. The depth and breadth to which ambulatory care RNs engage in the total scope of professional ambulatory care nursing practice is dependent upon their education, experience, role, practice setting, and the populations served (American Nurses Association [ANA], 2015).

Each standard contains three sections:

1. A statement of the standard addressed.
2. Measurement criteria that may be used for demonstrating competency for meeting the standard.
3. Additional standard statements and measurement criteria for nurse executives, administrators, and managers.

These changes offer clarification and specificity for the distinct domains of clinical and administrative nursing practice in ambulatory care settings.

Scope of Practice for Professional Ambulatory Care Nursing

The scope of practice statement describes the “who,” “what,” “where,” “when,” “why,” and “how” of professional ambulatory care nursing practice. It offers a picture of the dynamism and complexity of nursing in outpatient settings and its evolving boundaries (ANA, 2015). The scope of practice initially defines the ambulatory care nursing specialty, its defining characteristics, and presents its conceptual framework. This document also reviews the history of ambulatory care nursing, the events that changed its nature over time, the existing challenges, and the future possibilities.

I. Definition of Professional Ambulatory Care Nursing

Professional ambulatory care nursing is a complex, multifaceted specialty that encompasses independent and collaborative practice. The comprehensive practice of ambulatory care nursing is one built upon a broad knowledge base of nursing and health sciences, and applies clinical expertise rooted in the nursing process. RNs use evidence-based information across a variety of outpatient health care settings to achieve and ensure patient safety and quality of care while improving patient outcomes (AAACN, 2011).

Ambulatory care includes those clinical, organizational, and professional activities engaged in by RNs with and for individuals, groups, and populations who seek assistance with improving health and/or seek care for health-related problems. RNs promote optimal wellness, participate in the management of acute illness, assist the patient to manage the effects of chronic disease and disability, and provide support in end-of-life care. The ambulatory care RN is accountable for the provision of nursing care in accordance with relevant federal requirements, state laws and nurse practice acts, regulatory standards, the standards of professional ambulatory care nursing practice, other relevant professional standards, and organizational policies (AAACN, 2011).

Defining Characteristics

The following attributes (AAACN, 2011, pp. 6-7) are distinctive to professional RN practice in ambulatory care settings:

1. Ambulatory nursing care requires critical reasoning and astute clinical judgment to expedite appropriate care and treatment, especially given the patient may present with complex problems or potentially life-threatening conditions.
2. Ambulatory care RNs provide quality care across the life span to individuals, families, caregivers, groups, populations, and communities.
3. Ambulatory care nursing occurs across the continuum of care in a variety of settings, which include but are not limited to:
 - Hospital-based outpatient clinics/centers.
 - Solo or group medical practices.
 - Ambulatory surgery and diagnostic procedure centers.
 - Telehealth service environments.
 - University and community hospital clinics.
 - Military and Veterans Administration settings.
 - Nurse-managed clinics.
 - Managed care organizations.
 - Colleges and educational institutions.
 - Freestanding community facilities.
 - Care coordination organizations.
 - Patients' homes.
4. Ambulatory care RNs interact with patients during face-to-face encounters or through a variety of telecommunication strategies, often establishing long-term relationships.
5. Telehealth nursing is an integral component of professional ambulatory care nursing that utilizes a variety of telecommunications technologies during encounters to assess, triage, provide nursing consultation, and perform follow up and care coordination.
6. Ambulatory care RNs practicing in telehealth environments adhere to the AAACN *Scope and Standards of Practice for Professional Telehealth Nursing* (AAACN, in press).
7. During each encounter, the ambulatory care RN focuses on patient safety and the quality of nursing care by applying appropriate nursing interventions, such as identifying and clarifying patient needs, performing procedures, conducting health education, promoting patient advocacy, coordinating nursing and other health services, assisting the patient to navigate the health care system, and evaluating patient outcomes.
8. Nurse-patient encounters in clinical settings can occur once or as a series of occurrences, are usually less than 24 hours in length at any one time, and occur in single or group settings.
9. Ambulatory care RNs, acting as partners, advocates, and advisors, assist and support patients/families in the optimal management of their health care, respecting their culture and values, individual needs, health goals, and treatment preferences.
10. Ambulatory care RNs facilitate continuity of care using the nursing process, interprofessional collaboration, and coordination of and access to appropriate health care services and community resources across the care continuum.
11. Ambulatory care RNs are knowledgeable about and provide leadership in the clinical and managerial operations of the organization.

12. Ambulatory care RNs design, administer, and evaluate nursing services within the organization in accord with relevant federal requirements, state laws and nurse practice acts, regulatory standards, and institutional policies and procedures.
13. Ambulatory care RNs provide operational accountability for and coordination of nursing services, including the appropriate skill mix and delegation of roles and responsibilities for licensed and unlicensed nursing personnel.
14. Ambulatory care RNs apply the provisions of the ANA Code of Ethics for Nurses to their own professional practice.
15. Ambulatory care RNs pursue lifelong learning, which updates and expands their clinical, organizational, and professional knowledge, skills, and abilities in professional practice.
16. Ambulatory care RNs functioning in care coordination and transition management roles and settings adhere to the AACN *Scope and Standards of Practice for RNs in Care Coordination and Transition Management* (AACN, 2016).

Objectives of Ambulatory Care Nursing

The major objectives of ambulatory care nursing align with other types of nursing to:

- Protect and promote health.
- Minimize suffering.
- Maximize health literacy and education.
- Prevent illness and injury.
- Apply nursing interventions to human responses in health, illness, disease, disability, and end-of-life circumstances.
- Actively advocate for optimal coordinated health care of individuals, families, communities, and populations aimed at improving the whole person's well-being.

Interactions between patients and ambulatory care nurses to achieve patient goals occur in the context of caring, compassion, and sensitivity to the patient's cultural, ethnic, and age-related needs.

Professional ambulatory care RNs use the nursing process in a variety of settings and roles. The RN performs an assessment of a population, individual, or caregiver's problems and concerns. The ambulatory care RN analyzes and integrates subjective and objective data, decides on a plan of nursing action, applies the appropriate nursing intervention, and evaluates the outcomes.

II. Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for ambulatory care nursing identifies three major concepts and the links between and among them: patient, environment, and nurse.

Patient

Inherent within the concept of patient is each individual is unique; functions holistically as a biological, psychosocial, and spiritual being; and is the

center of patient-nurse interactions. Patients in the ambulatory care setting refer to individuals, families, caregivers/support systems, groups, and populations that approach the health system in a variety of circumstances or health states. Patient health states are categorized as wellness or health, acute illness, chronic disease and/or disability, and end of life.

Generally, the patient initiates contact with the ambulatory care system to meet his or her wellness concerns and health needs. In many cases, if the patient has a chronic disease/disability or is in an end-of-life phase, the nurse intermittently reaches out and contacts the patient to determine his or her status and needs. Patients are always the central focus and maintain control of the encounter and treatment with the nurse in a consultative role.

Environment

Environment as a concept helps define ambulatory care nursing practice, setting it apart from other nursing specialties. In addition to unique nurse-patient relationships and interactions, ambulatory care nurses also must address organizational, social, economic, legal, and political factors within the health care system and in the external health care environment. The ambulatory care environment has two major dimensions.

Internal care delivery environment. The ambulatory nursing care delivery environment is dynamic and diverse – a broad scope of practice in multifaceted settings where patients seek health care treatment and where the professional RN functions. Regardless of the setting, ambulatory encounters are always less than 24 hours. The internal environment also includes virtual encounters using telehealth technologies to provide care across distances.

External health care environment. The external environment refers both to the physical location of each health care practice setting as well as to health care contextual factors and health resource agencies across the greater environment that affect ambulatory care practice in unique ways.

The external geographical locale, available health care resources, and contextual factors that affect an individual ambulatory health care setting often influence that setting's mission, patient population, and practices. These external contextual factors include, but are not necessarily limited to:

1. The patient's living environment.
2. The surrounding community population's specific needs, perceptions, and resources.
3. The health resources available across the community's health care continuum to include virtual platforms.
4. Health policy, governmental laws, professional practice regulations, and accrediting agencies.
5. Health care financing systems.
6. Advances in science and technology (scientific knowledge, diagnostic, treatment, and telehealth technologies).

Standards of Practice for Professional Ambulatory Care Nursing

AAACN, as the specialty nursing organization for RNs practicing in ambulatory care, is responsible for establishing and publishing the standards for ambulatory care RN practice. These standards are authoritative statements that describe the responsibilities for which ambulatory care RNs are accountable. In this edition, the standards occur in two domains: *Clinical Practice* and *Professional Performance*.

Standards of Professional Clinical Practice

The six Clinical Practice Standards address the science and art of RN clinical practice in ambulatory care – the *nursing process*. The nursing process is a rational, systematic method of planning and providing nursing care. Ida J. Orlando developed the process in the late 1950s, as she observed RNs as they practiced.

The profession has refined the process over the intervening decades and now has six steps, applicable to both individuals and populations that are the basis of the standards of clinical practice in nursing (ANA, 2010, 2015):

- **Assessment:** Professional RN's systematic, dynamic collection and analysis of the patient and/or the population with the presenting concern, using physiological, psycho-socio-cultural, spiritual, economic, and lifestyle data as well as the patient's response to the problem.
- **Nursing Diagnosis:** Professional RN statement that represents the RN's clinical judgment about the patient's response to actual or potential health conditions or needs.
- **Identification of Expected Outcomes/Goals:** Professional RN identifies and specifies the expected outcomes of an individualized plan of therapies and/or treatment(s) using input from the patient/family, other health professionals, and current scientific evidence.

- **Planning:** Professional RN outlines a set of written statements that identify specific needed services and interventions with measurable and achievable short and long-term goals that meet expected outcomes.
- **Implementation:** Professional RN provides nursing care services to meet the patient's needs and goals and documents all activities. Implementation involves a variety of roles:
 - Coordination of Care
 - Health Teaching and Health Promotion
 - Telehealth Services
 - Consultation
- **Evaluation:** Professional RN's continual appraisal of the patient's status and the effectiveness of the care received, revising the care plan and interventions as appropriate.

Standards of Nursing Organizational and Professional Performance

The ten Professional Performance Standards for ambulatory care RNs identify a competent level of behavior in the organizational and professional dimensions of each ambulatory care RN's specific role. These behaviors include activities related to:

- **Ethics**
- **Education**
- **Research and Evidence-Based Practice**
- **Performance Improvement**
- **Communication**
- **Leadership**
- **Collaboration**
- **Professional Practice Evaluation**
- **Resource Utilization**
- **Environment**

STANDARD 1

Assessment

Standard

The RN practicing in the ambulatory care setting systematically collects or supervises the collection of focused data relating to health needs and concerns of a patient, group, or population.

Competencies

Ambulatory care RNs:

1. Establish a therapeutic rapport with patient and caregivers as well as determine the patient's perception of his or her immediate needs and concerns.
2. Identify barriers to providing optimal care (e.g., language, culture, and behavioral health issues).
3. Collect or validate the collection of subjective and objective health data from multiple primary and secondary sources.
4. Use applicable evidence-based assessment techniques and instruments related to ambulatory care nursing in collecting pertinent patient or population data.
5. Prioritize data collection activities based on the patient's, group's, or population's immediate health need or the nurse's clinical expertise of anticipated patient needs.
6. Synthesize available data, information, and nursing knowledge relevant to the presenting health situation to identify patterns and variances as well as gaps in care.
7. Prioritize the data and information collected based on the patient's or population's condition and preferences, situation, and/or anticipated needs.
8. Document the information and data collected in a retrievable, understandable, and readable format.
9. Reassess the patient and situation as needed to address alterations in health status.

Additional Competencies for Nurse Executives, Administrators, and Managers

Ambulatory care nurse executives, administrators, and managers:

1. Use evidence-based practice guidelines to determine and/or refine data collection and analysis processes.
2. Identify the essential elements of assessment and documentation for a given practice setting.
3. Establish training, education, and resources on evidence-based assessment techniques for all nursing staff.
4. Ensure information systems are in place that support the input and retrieval of reliable patient data.
5. Establish assessment expectations and monitor individual nursing staff performance.

Standards of Nursing Organizational and Professional Performance

STANDARD 12

Leadership

Standard

The RN practicing in the ambulatory care setting demonstrates leadership behaviors in practice settings, across the profession, and in the community.

Competencies

Ambulatory care RNs:

1. Demonstrate respect for the dignity, worth, and contributions of others.
2. Acknowledge and learn from mistakes, taking remedial action as needed.
3. Recognize, address, and mitigate workflow inefficiencies.
4. Proactively anticipate and recognize the needs of others, using positive interactions and creative solutions to achieve effective outcomes.
5. Actively advocate for collegial, safe environments in ambulatory care clinical practice, organizational environments, and community settings.
6. Train and mentor newly assigned personnel and students.
7. Assume responsibility and accountability for coordinating all aspects of the nursing process including delegated care.
8. Lead and participate in process improvement teams, committees, and activities related to nursing and health care practice in clinical, organizational, and community settings.
9. Collaborate with the interprofessional health care team to build and maintain an effective and dynamic professional relationship.
10. Participate actively in organizational shared decision-making situations that improve ambulatory care nursing practice, organizational performance, and outcomes.
11. Promote the continued growth, strength, and effectiveness of professional ambulatory care nursing through membership and active participation in professional and community organizations.
12. Cultivate and sustain a culture of safety.
13. Collaborate with colleagues through membership in professional ambulatory care nursing organizations.

Additional Competencies for Nurse Executives, Administrators, and Managers

Ambulatory care nurse executives, administrators, and managers:

1. Inspire nursing staff with a shared vision and direction for continuous quality improvement.
2. Lead and support activities that improve nursing practice, organizational performance, and healthy patient outcomes.
3. Build learning environments addressing shared decision making, evidence-based practice, organizational strategic direction, and advances in the health care industry.
4. Lead small and large-scale evidence-based change that is sensitive to organizational culture and the values and perspectives of personnel.
5. Utilize transformational leadership to inspire shared practice and professional accountability.
6. Utilize conflict management skills to mediate professional and workplace issues resulting in mutually acceptable resolutions.
7. Acknowledge and reward contributions of individual personnel and high-performing teams.
8. Influence decision-making bodies to formulate standards that enhance professional nursing and health care practices, expand health system capabilities, and improve the health of individuals and the community.