Specialty Nurse Certification Effects Patient Outcomes
Brenda L. Wilkerson, BSN, CRNFA(e), CPSN(e)

This article reports on studies that have shown specialty nurses with certification contribute to quality patient outcomes and satisfaction. In addition, nurses who have achieved their specialty certification have perceived intrinsic value, empowerment and heighten collaboration with the health care team.

KEY WORDS: certification, collaboration, patient outcomes, professionalism, specialty

Obtaining specialty certification validates that a nurse has advanced from an entry level of competency licensure, which is legal permission to practice and is governed by legislation, to a level of specialty knowledge, experience, and clinical judgment. Of the 2.9 million registered nurses in the United States, more than a quarter million have been certified by the American Nurses Credentialing Center (ANCC) since 1990. Approximately 80,000 advanced practice nurses are currently certified by ANCC (2010).

Each specialty has prerequisites the registered nurse must meet before taking their certification examinations. They must demonstrate that they hold an active registered nurse license, have appropriate education and for all but nurse practitioners and clinical nurse specialists, and have experience in the specialty field. The certification examinations are designed by certified nurses in the specialty under the guidance of a professional psychometrist who ensures that all tests are psychometrically sound and legally defensible. Tests are based on the scope and standards of practice approved by the American Nurses Association Congress of Nursing Practice and Economics (Certification FAQs, ANCC, Retrieved January 27, 2010).

Studies have shown that the certified specialty nurse has an increased confidence level and self-perception. Certification, therefore, exemplifies an attitude of empowerment, quality collaboration with the health care team, confirmation of competence, and validation of clinical expertise. Certified specialty nurses are not always monetarily rewarded for their achievements. The motivational factor for nurses to seek certification tends to be their "perceived value of personal development and self-concept" (Byrne, Valentine, & Carter, 2004). A 2001 international study was conducted of the Certified Nurse Workforce. This study included a random sample of 19,452 nurses from 23 certifying organizations in the United States and Canada. The purpose of this study was to obtain statistics regarding the nurses who seek certification and how certification affects nurses who receive it. This study provided initial evidence that certification is likely to positively impact patient outcomes. Ninety-five percent of respondents reported positive changes in their nursing practice related to certification. These changes included personal and professional growth, increased confidence, job satisfaction, autonomy, credibility, competence, patient satisfaction, and accountability. Certification is regarded as a means of validating cognitive knowledge and continued competency as recommended by the Institute of Medicine (Briggs, Brown, Kesten, & Heath, 2006).

Brenda L. Wilkerson, BSN, CRNFA(e), CPSN(e), is Clinical Nursing Instructor, Bellarmine University, Louisville, Kentucky.

Address correspondence to Brenda L. Wilkerson, BSN, CRNFA(e), CPSN(e), 4603 Harbold Court, Louisville, KY 40241 (e-mail: bwrnfa@bellsouth.net).

The author does not have an actual or potential conflict of interest relative to my publication of this article.

The author has not received any funding to support this article.

DOI: 10.1097/PSN.0b013e31821b5a9c
When not all states require continuing education hours to renew a nurse’s license, national specialty certification attests to competency for individual health care professionals (AACN, 2003). National certification also safeguards the public by ensuring that certified individuals are held accountable for continued knowledge as their nursing careers progress. The American College of Healthcare Executives (ACHE) believes that continuous learning is essential to our ability to innovate, improve our organizations, and provide excellence in health care delivery. Furthermore, health care leaders have an ongoing responsibility to foster their own professional development and continuous learning (ACHE Strategic Plan, 2009–2011; Wade, 2009).

**MANAGEMENT’S PERCEPTION OF THE CERTIFIED SPECIALTY NURSE**

The American Board of Nursing Specialties has undertaken a focused research agenda aimed at determining the value of certification. Its first study of 20 certifying organizations, more than 11,000 certified nurses, and 36 different certifications credentials, was completed in 2005. Redd and Alexander (1997) examined the performance of certified nurses and found that supervisors rated certified nurses significantly higher than noncertified nurses on the parameters of “teaching/collaboration” and “planning/evaluation.” Additionally, in hospitals where CCRNs hold key coordinator positions on the code blue teams, the hospital performs better than the national benchmarks on six code-related indicators. In 2004, the American Association of Critical-Care Nurses (AACN, 2003) conducted the National Critical Care Survey, which examined support for national certification in critical care areas. This study surveyed administrators and nurses from 120 hospitals throughout 300 critical care units. Ninety-three percent of respondents indicated strong nurse manager support for certification (Watts, 2010).

As health care organizations embark on their journeys to excellence in pursuit of Magnet recognition from the ANCC, they are encouraged to improve their demographic profile by increasing the number of certified nurses in their organization. Hospitals that employ a high percentage of certified nurses would be a step ahead for obtaining Magnet status (Shirey, 2005).

**PATIENT OUTCOMES**

Public safety is one of the most commonly cited reasons in support of specialty certification. Benefits of specialty nurse certification relate to patient safety, satisfaction, and positive outcomes. In several studies, there was a positive increase in all of these areas. In a failure to rescue study, more than 40% of nurses who had been certified 5 years or less attributed certification knowledge to a reduced incidence of failure to rescue patients experiencing adverse events (Cary, 2002; Briggs et al., 2006; Wood & Joyee, 2008). In 1999, the ANCC surveyed a randomized sample of 40,426 certified registered nurses from 20 certifying organizations’ directories. Demographic and practice characteristics were examined. When asked about the effects of certification, 95% of the respondents reported that certification was linked to such things as improvement in practice related to patient safety, patient care, and higher patient satisfaction ratings (AACN, 2003). Along with safeguarding the public, certification also promotes quality nursing care and excellence. Certification demonstrates clinical expertise, knowledge, and professionalism to patients, the public, and nursing peers (Briggs et al., 2006).

Several studies have linked a greater number of direct patient care hours from a certified registered nurse to significantly decreased incidences of hospital-acquired infections, adverse events related to failure to rescue and inversely related to the frequency of patient falls (Kendall-Gallagher & Blegen, 2009). Therefore, advocating increasing the number of certified registered nurses at the bedside would positively impact both patient safety and quality of nursing care.

In addition, an interactive study by Watts (2010) demonstrated that 8 of 10 individuals were aware that nurses could obtain certification and 3 of 4 would be more likely to choose a hospital that employed a higher percentage of certified nurses.

On the basis of the research, we know that appropriate staffing and positive work environments impact quality of nursing care. We also know from clinicians that knowledge and skill level play a role in preventing or creating risk of harm for patients. Heath, Andrews, and Graham-Garcia (2001) concluded that nurses who continue their education and belong to professional organizations are more likely to be independent thinkers and utilize creative problem-solving techniques. Professional nurses strive to provide the best possible care for their patients. Certification simply gives them extra tools to accomplish that goal.

**CONCLUSION AND SUMMARY**

The high priority in the health care arena is to reduce the cost of health care and maintain quality of care. Specialty nurse certification provides personal satisfaction and affirmation of skills, potential opportunities for advancement, a positive marketing tool for institutions, and confirmation to the client that he or she is cared for by highly trained
professionals. Certification for nurses in their respective specialty would greatly benefit the consumer, provider, and professional nurse.

REFERENCES


