

The Essential Role Of Nurses In Improving Access, Quality, And Equity In Health Care

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Abstract:

Nurses, as the largest segment of the health care workforce, are uniquely positioned to drive improvements in health care access, quality, and equity. This article explores four key areas where nurses can make a significant impact: increasing access for underserved populations, providing high-quality person-centered care, addressing social determinants of health, and advocating for policy changes. By leveraging nurses' skills, patient relationships, and presence across care settings, health systems can accelerate progress toward achieving optimal health for all. Nurses are improving access through community-based care and telehealth, promoting

quality by tailoring care to patient needs, addressing social determinants of health through innovative roles and partnerships, and advocating for policies to create healthier conditions. Realizing nurses' full potential will require removing barriers to practice, investing in education and new care models, and dismantling structural racism. Nurses' trusted voice and expertise position them to lead the movement toward health equity.

Introduction

Nurses play a critical role in improving health care access and quality for individuals and communities. As the largest healthcare profession, with over 4 million registered nurses in the U.S. alone, nurses are uniquely positioned to extend the reach of care, improve care coordination, and help address social determinants of health to promote health equity [1,2]. The landmark Future of Nursing report from the Institute of Medicine (now called the National Academy of Medicine) emphasized the need to remove barriers preventing nurses from practicing to the full extent of their education and training in order to improve access to quality care [3]. In the decade since that report, evidence has continued to demonstrate how enabling nurses to take on expanded roles and work in new settings can help fill gaps in care related to primary care shortages, lack of providers in rural areas, and unmet social needs [4,5].

At the same time, the concept of quality in health care has evolved from focusing primarily on clinical metrics to embracing a broader definition that considers patient experience, equity, and attention to social determinants of health [6]. Experts increasingly agree that achieving true quality requires providing care that is safe, timely, effective, efficient, equitable, and patient-centered [7]. Nurses play integral roles across all these domains of quality. With their versatile skills, frequent patient interactions, and presence across settings, nurses are ideally equipped to help redesign systems of care to be more accessible, equitable, and responsive to patient needs [2].

This article reviews key opportunities for nurses to improve access and quality by: 1) Increasing access for underserved populations, 2) Providing high-quality, person-centered care, 3)

Addressing social determinants of health, and 4) Advocating for policy change. Examples of both evidence-based models and emerging roles are highlighted. By leveraging the nursing workforce in innovative ways, health care systems can make meaningful progress toward the goals of achieving health equity and delivering care that improves outcomes for all.

1. Increasing Access for Underserved Populations

Despite coverage gains from the Affordable Care Act, significant barriers to accessing health care services persist in the U.S., particularly for racial/ethnic minorities, low-income populations, rural residents, and other underserved groups. As of 2018, 30 million people in the U.S. still lacked health insurance and many more were underinsured [8]. Beyond coverage, other obstacles such as provider shortages, distance to care facilities, transportation issues, and difficulty navigating the system prevent many from getting the care they need [9]. Increasing access for underserved populations is imperative for reducing health disparities.

Nurses are filling critical gaps in access by delivering care in settings beyond traditional clinics and hospitals. The rise of retail clinics, typically staffed by nurse practitioners, has helped increase the accessibility and affordability of services for basic health issues [5]. A report found that 58% of retail clinic visits represented new health care utilization, indicating they reached patients who otherwise may not have received care [10]. School nurses also play a vital role in extending access; for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, school nurses are often their only regular source of health care [11]. In the community, home visiting nurses connect underserved families, including those in rural areas, with essential preventive and social services [12]. By meeting patients where they are, these nursing roles help overcome many traditional barriers to care.

Telehealth is another promising tool for nurses to expand access, especially for rural and underserved populations. Remote monitoring, video visits, and asynchronous "store-and-forward" encounters enable nurses to provide care and support to patients who may otherwise go without needed services due to distance or transportation issues [13]. Particularly in rural areas experiencing primary care shortages, nurse-led telehealth initiatives have demonstrated improvements in

chronic disease management and health outcomes [14,15]. While barriers related to reimbursement, licensure, and technology infrastructure must still be addressed, telehealth holds immense potential for nurses to bridge gaps in access.

2. Providing High-Quality, Person-Centered Care

Nurses are essential for ensuring health care services are of the highest quality and responsive to individual patient needs and preferences. Across settings, nurses spend the most time with patients, positioning them to incorporate patient values and perspectives into the delivery of care. Studies show higher nurse staffing levels and a more educated nursing workforce are associated with better quality measures and patient outcomes, including fewer complications, lower mortality rates, and higher patient satisfaction [16,17].

The movement toward patient and family engagement has further elevated the importance of patient-centered care, which the Institute of Medicine (IOM) defines as "care that is respectful of and responsive to individual patient preferences, needs, and values" [7]. Nurses are uniquely prepared to provide comprehensive, personalized care due to their holistic approach and emphasis on caring and human connection. Evidence indicates patients perceive nurses as more person-focused compared to other providers [18]. Patient-centered nursing interventions have been shown to reduce anxiety, improve self-care abilities, and enhance quality of life across various populations and conditions [19,20].

Achieving high-quality, person-centered care requires nurses to understand and address the diverse backgrounds and social contexts shaping patients' lived experiences. Providing culturally competent care that recognizes how factors like language, health literacy, socioeconomic status, and cultural beliefs influence health behaviors and outcomes is a core nursing responsibility [21]. Cultural competence education is now a standard component of nursing curricula and a requirement for accreditation [22]. However, experts contend that true cultural humility - defined as an ongoing commitment to self-reflection and redressing power imbalances - should be the goal [23]. Incorporating cultural humility and implicit bias training throughout nursing education can promote more equitable, person-centered care.

Care coordination is another key function where nurses contribute to higher quality, patient-centered care. With their systems perspective and collaborative skills, nurses often lead interdisciplinary efforts to manage care transitions, reconcile medications, and ensure patients receive appropriate follow-up services [24]. Continuity of care is especially important for patients with complex needs; nurse care coordination has been shown to reduce readmissions, prevent avoidable hospitalizations, and lower costs for high-need populations [17]. By facilitating seamless, coordinated care aligned with patient goals, nurses help achieve the objectives of safety, effectiveness, and patient-centeredness.

3. Addressing Social Determinants of Health

Substantial evidence has established that social determinants - the conditions in which people live, work, and play - have a profound impact on health outcomes, with estimates suggesting social, environmental, and behavioral factors account for up to 90% of health [25]. Poverty, unstable housing, food insecurity, unsafe neighborhoods, and other adverse social conditions create barriers to adopting healthy behaviors, accessing preventive services, and managing chronic illnesses. Achieving health equity and improving population health require addressing these underlying social determinants.

Nurses are increasingly stepping into roles specifically designed to identify and mitigate adverse social determinants of health. Care management programs employing nurses and social workers to connect high-need patients with community resources have proliferated in recent years [26]. In these models, nurses screen for unmet social needs, provide case management and care coordination services, and partner with community organizations to arrange supports such as transportation, housing assistance, or food aid [27].

For example, the Camden Coalition of Healthcare Providers pioneered a care management intervention where nurse-led teams engage frequently hospitalized patients to address medical and social complexity [28]. Early data indicated the program reduced hospital readmissions and costs for enrolled patients [29]. Geisinger Health's Bridging the Gaps program utilizes nurse case managers to connect high-risk patients to social services, resulting in a 20% reduction in emergency department visits [30]. CareMore Health's Togetherness

Program employs nurse practitioners to conduct home visits, perform comprehensive assessments, and link seniors to community supports, leading to decreased loneliness and fewer hospitalizations [31]. While research on health outcomes and costs is still limited, a growing body of evidence suggests addressing social needs can improve well-being and reduce avoidable care utilization [32].

Globally, nurses have long been leaders in promoting community and population health. In the U.S., public health nurses play crucial roles in organizing community partnerships, implementing place-based interventions, and developing locally tailored programs to create health-promoting environments [33]. Nurse home visitors provide education, social support, and linkages to services for vulnerable expectant and new mothers to enhance child and family well-being [34]. School nurses conduct screenings, connect students to resources, and advocate for policies that foster health in educational settings [11]. Across these diverse roles, nurses utilize their assessment skills, patient relationships, and knowledge of the social determinants to promote upstream, prevention-oriented approaches.

Realizing the full potential of nurses to address social determinants will require innovation in delivery and payment models. Promising approaches include integrating social determinants into primary care, developing targeted care management interventions for high-risk populations, and creating financial incentives for health care organizations to invest in social interventions [35]. Existing quality measures and value-based payment programs could be leveraged to encourage screening for social needs and tracking referrals to community services [36]. Partnerships between health care, public health, and social service sectors are needed to align and coordinate efforts to address social determinants [37]. Within these emerging models, nurses can serve as catalysts for re-orienting systems to address social determinants as integral components of health.

4. Advocating for Policy Change

Nurses have a long history of advocating for policies that protect and promote the public's health. From Florence Nightingale's pioneering work in sanitation to Lillian Wald's founding of public health nursing, nurses have advanced

reforms to create healthier living conditions and expand access to care [38]. This tradition continues today, with nurses leading efforts to enact policies that address SDOH and advance health equity.

One of the most significant policy changes for increasing access and improving quality in recent years was the passage of the Affordable Care Act (ACA) in 2010. Nurses were active advocates for the ACA and have been leaders in maximizing its potential to extend coverage and enhance care delivery [39]. The American Nurses Association launched the Nurses for Health Reform campaign to mobilize nurses in support of the legislation [40]. Nurses testified before Congress, participated in White House roundtables, and organized grassroots efforts to build momentum for the law's passage and defend against repeal attempts.

The ACA included numerous provisions aligned with nursing priorities, such as expanding coverage, emphasizing prevention, strengthening the primary care workforce, and testing new models of care [39]. For example, the law established the Center for Medicare and Medicaid Innovation, which has funded several nurse-led care delivery models aimed at reducing costs and improving quality [41]. The ACA also created opportunities to scale nurse-led transitional care models and community-based care coordination programs [24]. By extending health insurance to over 20 million people and enabling nurses to work in innovative roles, the ACA represents a major policy achievement for increasing access and quality.

Nurses continue to advocate for policies to address persistent inequities and strengthen the social safety net. A top priority is protecting and expanding Medicaid, which provides vital coverage to 75 million low-income Americans and has been shown to improve access, financial security, and health outcomes [42]. Nurses have opposed efforts to restrict Medicaid eligibility through work requirements and advocated for extending coverage to new populations, such as postpartum women [43]. Nurses also support increased funding for social programs like affordable housing, nutrition assistance, and early childhood education, recognizing these investments can yield long-term health benefits and reduce health care costs [44].

Advancing health equity also requires dismantling racist policies and confronting injustices within nursing itself. Nursing organizations have issued calls to end systemic racism and pledged to combat discrimination within the profession [45,46]. Proposed actions include increasing diversity in nursing leadership, addressing barriers to educational attainment faced by students of color, and re-evaluating hiring practices to promote a more representative workforce. Nurses are also actively working to reduce maternal health disparities through implicit bias training, community-based doula programs, and anti-racist policy reforms [47]. Achieving health equity will require sustained, multi-level efforts to eradicate racism and discrimination.

At the most local level, nurses are influential voices in shaping policies within their own institutions and communities. Nurse leaders sit on hospital boards and governance committees, bringing their expertise to bear on decisions about resource allocation, patient safety protocols, staffing levels, and quality improvement priorities. In public health departments, nurses inform the setting of local health priorities and development of programs to meet community needs. Nurses also partner with community organizations on grassroots initiatives to advocate for change, like improving access to healthy foods, creating safe spaces for physical activity, or securing funding for school health services. Through their trusting relationships and understanding of community assets and challenges, nurses are powerful champions for policies to create equitable conditions for health.

Conclusion

Nurses play diverse and essential roles in increasing access to care, improving quality and patient experience, addressing social determinants of health, and advocating for policy changes to advance health equity. From expanding the reach of primary care to spearheading innovative care delivery models to promoting health in homes and communities, nurses are leading efforts to re-envision systems and services to meet the complex needs of individuals and populations.

The COVID-19 pandemic has further illuminated nurses' vital contributions, as they have provided frontline care, led infection control efforts, and served as crucial conduits to social services and supports. The current crises have also

underscored the urgency of building a more equitable, accessible, and responsive health care system. Unleashing the full capacity of nurses to meet rising demands and to address long-standing health disparities will require policies to remove barriers to nursing practice, investment in new care models and roles, and a commitment to dismantling the systemic racism that has produced an inequitable system.

The nursing profession is 4 million strong and growing - representing immense potential to be catalysts for achieving the goals of expanding access, elevating quality, and promoting equity. When empowered to practice to the full extent of their skills and expertise, nurses can accelerate progress toward a more just and effective health care system that optimizes the health and well-being of all.

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