



**National
Association of
Neonatal
Nurses**

**National Association of
Neonatal Nurse Practitioners**



A division of NANN

The Doctor of Nursing Practice Degree

Position Statement #3056

NANNP Council
November 2011

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As the professional voice of neonatal nurse practitioners, the National Association of Neonatal Nurse Practitioners (NANNP) supports the Doctor of Nursing Practice (DNP) degree as a terminal, practice-focused degree in nursing. NANNP also supports pursuit of the DNP degree as one option for neonatal nurse practitioner (NNP) education but cannot support the universal requirement of the DNP degree for entry into advanced neonatal nursing practice by 2015.

Association Position

NANNP supports the DNP degree as a practice-focused doctoral degree developed to prepare nurses for the complex clinical practice environment. Research continues to show that master's degree-prepared neonatal nurse practitioners (NNPs) currently practicing in advanced clinical roles provide safe and cost-effective care (Karlowicz & McMurray, 2000; Mitchell-DiCenso et al., 1996; Reynolds & Bricker, 2007). Therefore, while supportive of the DNP degree, NANNP continues to endorse both master's and doctoral degree programs as preparation for entry into advanced neonatal nursing practice.

Background and Significance

Although decades of evidence have shown that NNPs provide cost-effective, high-quality care for their patients and families (Bissinger, Allred, Arford, & Belling, 1997; Karlowicz & McMurray, 2000; Reynolds & Bricker, 2007; Schultz, Liptak, & Fioravanti, 1994), the demand for increased education at all levels of nursing is growing (Greiner & Knebel, 2003; Institute of Medicine, 2010).

Educational requirements for nurse practitioners have evolved significantly over the past several decades. Societal drivers as well as trends in education and health care are advancing the movement for the doctoral degree, specifically the practice doctorate, as the terminal degree for the profession of nursing. The concept of a practice doctorate is not new; rather, the concept has been evolving since 1979 with the introduction of the nursing doctorate at Case Western Reserve University (American Association of Colleges of Nursing [AACN], 2004). Although doctor of nursing programs pioneered the practice doctorate movement more than 25 years ago, the current resurgence of interest in the practice doctorate may transform the nurse practitioner (NP) and other areas of advanced practice nursing education in a manner similar to the evolution from post-basic certificate to master's degree in NP education.

On October 25, 2004, the member schools affiliated with AACN voted to endorse the *AACN Position Statement on the Practice Doctorate in Nursing* (AACN, 2004). This decision called for moving the current level of preparation necessary for advanced nursing practice from the master's degree to the doctorate level by 2015. Factors cited by AACN for endorsing this change in nursing education at the graduate level include the rapid expansion of knowledge underlying practice; the increased complexity of patient care; national concerns about the quality of care and patient safety; shortages of nursing personnel, which in turn demand a higher level of preparation for leaders who can design and assess care; shortages of nursing faculty with doctoral-level preparation; and higher expectations for the educational preparation of other members of the healthcare team.

Although endorsement of the DNP degree as an educational requirement for entry into advanced nursing practice met with early opposition, professional nursing organizations and nurse educators continue to move toward adopting AACN's recommendations despite ongoing dispute about the targeted implementation date of 2015 (AANP, 2010; ANA, 2011; Lenz, 2005; National Association of Pediatric Nurse Practitioners [NAPNAP], 2008).

Recommendations

1. Nurses should achieve higher levels of education and training so that they can respond to the increasing demands and complexity of neonatal health care.
2. Educational programs for nurses seeking advanced practice degrees should provide a seamless transition into these higher degree programs.
3. Accreditation and educational standards for NNP programs should be maintained in all NNP programs to ensure the preparation of safe, highly qualified clinicians who can be certified and recognized in the regulatory arena and changing healthcare environment (NANN, 2009).
4. The DNP program should be supported as one option for NNP education and should be recommended as a practice-focused doctorate for advanced nursing expertise representing the highest level of clinical competence.
5. Both master's and DNP programs should be endorsed as providing proper preparation for entry into advanced nursing practice.
6. The requirement of the DNP degree for entry into NNP practice should be a future-oriented goal.
7. The transition to clinical doctoral preparation for NNPs should be seamless and should not have a negative impact on NNP practice, practice sites, and the quality and safety of care.
8. The term *practice-focused doctorate* should be used in place of *clinical doctorate*, and the DNP should be the degree associated with this education.
9. DNP graduates should use their professional role title.
10. The advanced practice nursing community should advocate for ongoing health services research that evaluates the impact of advanced nursing education on the workforce and its relationship to cost, quality, and access to health care.

Conclusions

Increasingly complex healthcare systems require NNPs to have the highest level of educational preparation—in the areas of leadership, health policy, evidence-based practice, systems improvement, informatics, teamwork, and clinical content—if they are to be active participants in improving our healthcare system. The changes in the healthcare system require NNPs to be expert clinicians as well as leaders in care. DNP curricula build on traditional master's programs by providing education in evidence-based practice, quality improvement, and systems leadership, among other key areas. The DNP degree is designed for

nurses seeking a terminal degree in nursing practice and offers an alternative to research-focused doctoral programs. DNP-prepared nurses are well equipped to fully implement the science developed by nurse researchers prepared in PhD, doctor of nursing science (DNSc), and other research-focused nursing doctoral programs.

The practice doctorate prepares NNPs to provide leadership and improve methods of healthcare delivery to neonates and their families and complements the research-focused nursing doctorate. The evolution of existing master's programs into practice-focused doctoral programs can add strength to practice and recognition of NNPs in the healthcare arena. NANNP supports the DNP degree as a terminal practice-focused degree in nursing. NANNP also supports both master's and DNP degree programs as preparation for entry into NNP practice.

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