

# Position Paper: The Role of the Registered Nurse in Ambulatory Care



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**Approved by the AAACN Board of Directors:  
September 2023**

The American Academy of Ambulatory Care Nursing (AAACN) recognizes a paradigm shift represented by the volume of health care delivery flowing from episodic acute care encounters to long-term relationships. This shift presents opportunities to further recognize and prepare nurse graduates for the complex and expanded role of the ambulatory care registered nurse (RN). This position paper discusses the

current state of the RN role in ambulatory care and provides a vision for the future. The paper further identifies challenges, poses possible solutions, and highlights the AAACN position on the role of the ambulatory care RN.

Ambulatory care nursing is a broad specialty that extends across diverse care settings providing care coordination and management to prevent gaps in health, avoid injury, promote disease prevention, restore health, and manage chronic illness and end-of-life needs, while ensuring the safety of care delivery and optimizing health outcomes and cost containment (Laughlin & Witwer, 2019). Historically, the role of the registered nurse (RN) in ambulatory care has focused on maximizing quality health outcomes across the lifespan in collaboration with individuals, families, communities, and populations of interest living anywhere along the rural-urban continuum, and is actively evolving in an ever-changing health care environment.

## Background

In 2011, AACN published its initial position statement on the role of the ambulatory care RN illustrating the broad category of professional services provided to patients within outpatient facilities and environments. In 2016, AACN published the second version of the position statement followed by the 2017 manuscript, further clarifying the role of the ambulatory care RN (AACN, 2016, 2017). Beebe and Myers (2022) identified the need to change the focus on how and where nurses practice. The shifting focus toward improved health and wellness, advancements in non-invasive procedures, and the use of data analytics continues to fuel non-inpatient efficiencies in ambulatory rather than inpatient settings, resulting in a growing need for ambulatory care RN expertise.

The core mission of ambulatory care nursing practice remains focused on optimizing individual and expanded population health care delivery (National Advisory Council on Nurse Education & Practice, 2016). Ambulatory care RN practice places an emphasis on upstream prevention, primary and specialty services, health disparities, social determinants of health, patient education, patient engagement and activation, effective provider-patient communications, transitions of care, long-term care planning, and attention to nurse-sensitive indicators (Hacker et al., 2022). The ambulatory care RN works in an increasingly less centralized, diverse, progressively complex, and rapidly changing environment (Fritz et al., 2022). In response to the evolving healthcare environment, ambulatory care nursing transcends traditional boundaries by leading and influencing emerging healthcare strategies related to innovative models of care, value-based reimbursement, and technological advancement. The ambulatory care RN advocates for patients

through interprofessional collaborations and relationships that expand community partnerships while integrating clinical outcomes across non-traditional healthcare settings (Fritz et al., 2022).

## The Evolving State of Ambulatory Care Nursing

Ambulatory care RNs are critical to the optimization of quality patient care, improving care outcomes, and long-term cost containment. The nursing profession has been faced with persistent shortages, high turnover, inequitable workforce distribution, and a rapidly aging population, in addition to a smaller pool of new nurses due to a lack of nurse educators (American Hospital Association, 2021; Haddad et al., 2023). AACN recognizes the evolution of ambulatory care nursing that is grounded in workforce development, ambulatory care RN roles, technology, informatics, government regulations, and payment models. AACN has a vision of the ambulatory care RN role in re-structured payment models, reimbursement opportunities, and nurse-managed clinics with a focus on advocacy, research, and strategic collaborations for enhancing health policy and improving population health.

### Workforce Status

By 2022, following in the wake of the COVID19 pandemic, there was a dramatic shift in the RN workforce availability. In 2020, 43% of the RN workforce was aged 55 years or older. In the 2022 survey, the same age cohort had decreased to 31% of the workforce. In addition, more than 20% of all RNs planned to retire over the following five years (Smiley et al., 2023).

## **Ambulatory Care RN Roles**

The emphasis on population health and wellness has prompted a national focus on health promotion, self-management support, and community-based care to provide high-value, safe, and effective care to at-risk populations (Haas et al., 2016).

## **Technology-Enhanced Practice**

Electronic telehealth visits, patient portals, and mobile data-gathering devices, along with structured telephone support, are healthcare advances influencing changes in ambulatory care nursing practice. Technology-enhanced nursing interventions provide health information and advice, and support lifestyle modification, medication adherence, and chronic condition management while reducing costs, fraud, and waste (National Institutes of Health, 2023). Ambulatory care RNs expand and support patients' use of evolving digital health technologies (Coffey et al., 2022).

## **Informatics**

Ambulatory care RNs possess and demonstrate core informatics, computer skill competencies, clinical support systems for decision-making, and to track and trend data associated with and influencing quality outcomes based on nurse-sensitive indicators, providing the potential for reimbursement modifications from the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) (Webb, 2021).

## **Governmental Regulation and Payment Models**

CMS (2023) is working on the development of new innovative payment and service delivery models. Following implementation of the Affordable Care Act, accountable care organizations, Medicare, and commercial payers continue to move away from traditional fee-for-

service reimbursement toward alternative payment models that test value-based care models and bundled care procedures (CMS, 2023).

## **Reimbursement Opportunities**

Transitional care and chronic care management billing codes permit payment to community-based providers associated with care coordination and transitional care services (CMS, 2023.). New models of reimbursement create the potential to untether ambulatory care nurses from a system where they are bundled into labor costs to one that recognizes independent contributions and the scope of nursing practice that generates RN value and billable revenue (Pittman et al., 2021).

## **Nurse-Managed Clinics**

Nurse practitioners (NPs) and ambulatory care RNs deliver independent and collaborative care in a variety of ambulatory care settings. An increase in NP-led clinics has had a positive impact on health care access and the nursing profession, with the potential to strengthen the role of the ambulatory care RN within a shared nurse practice team (Jean, 2023).

## **Advocacy**

The dynamic nature of population demographics and a refocus on restoration, wellness, and health promotion, along with a national mandate to reduce cost, waste, and unnecessary resource allocation, offers opportunities for ambulatory care RNs to reach individuals and populations previously inaccessible. Ambulatory care RNs are in a pivotal position to advocate for equitable delivery models in the context of social justice while supporting changes in social policy.

## Generation and Dissemination of Research

AAACN has acknowledged that ambulatory care nursing research has lagged in comparison to inpatient environments (Mastal et al., 2016). The role of the ambulatory care RN requires skills in quality improvement, research utilization, and dedicated time for active nursing research. Rapid dissemination of relevant and impactful evidence-based interventions is necessary across an array of ambulatory care settings.

## Strategic Collaborations

State nurse practice acts (NPAs) define the criteria for licensure and the practice of nursing. Each state's NPA enables prompt action in response to potential risk of harm to protect the health, safety, and welfare of residents. AAACN continues to develop collaborative partnerships with state and local professional nursing associations, national businesses, and healthcare organizations.

## The Value of the RN in Ambulatory Care

The *Future of Nursing 2020-2030* report supported the role of the ambulatory care RN in addressing social determinants of health that contribute negatively to health outcomes and health equity (National Academy of Medicine, 2021). The ambulatory nursing care model focuses on the assessment and management of the physical, biological, social, psychological, social, and environmental influences on health (Mastal et al., 2016). RN-led interventions enhance care provided by other members of the care team (Lukewich et al., 2022). The ambulatory care RN role aims to provide and promote high-quality, evidence-based care, resulting in:

- Improved health and wellness outcomes
- Reduction in negative or adverse events
- Exemplary patient experience(s)
- Equitable access to care across the lifespan
- Individual and population health engagement and management
- Mitigation of health disparities
- Eliminating negatively impacting social determinants of health
- Financial management of healthcare costs
- Ensuring emergency preparedness response
- Improved support and job satisfaction of interprofessional team members

AAACN recognizes that patient needs in the ambulatory care setting differ and continue to evolve from those in acute care. Hence, there is a need to highlight the unique contributions and complexity of ambulatory care nursing. Ambulatory care RNs are essential to the provision of:

- High-quality, evidence-based independent nursing interventions across the lifespan
- Safe, high-quality care delivery and the appropriate delegation of nursing services to unlicensed members of the healthcare team
- Coordination and facilitation of team-based care through interprofessional teams across the continuum
- Equitable access and availability of nursing care through the delivery of traditional in-person care, as well as telehealth and other virtual care models

## Challenges to Meeting the Vision

### Reimbursement

Medicare will compensate a nurse's employer for nursing services that are either directly employed or under contract through its allowable benefit categories (American Nurses Association, 2018). For example, telehealth and portal services allow ambulatory care RNs to bill for care coordination services (American Academy of Family Physicians, 2023). The current practice of incident-to billing for the nurse applies only to the established 'eligible professional' services billed to Medicare by the advanced practice nurse that are dependent or interdependent under the direction of a physician provider. The independent services of the ambulatory care RN are not identifiable on a health care billing statement and as such, are not reimbursed.

### Educational Preparation

Ambulatory care RNs require specialty training and orientation for competency in ambulatory practice. Nurse leaders must temper their expectations as RNs transition and gain proficiency in their ambulatory care role (Allen, 2016; Lambson & Dalton, 2022). Quality education for ambulatory care RNs demands a focus on ambulatory curriculum development in entry to practice programs (National Academy of Medicine, 2021).

### Nursing Faculty with Expertise in Ambulatory Care

The preparation of nurse graduates for entry to practice in ambulatory care settings requires faculty with expertise in ambulatory care clinical practice and research aimed to investigate the complexities of ambulatory care nursing practice.

## Ambulatory Care Nursing's Future

It is a new era in healthcare, where rapidly advancing health care technologies, artificial intelligence, synthesized data, wearable devices, virtual care, and non-traditional health care services are leading and driving innovation and reimagining global care delivery (Huhn et al., 2022; Jones-Bell et al., 2018). Ambulatory care RNs must partner with, contribute to, and prepare future nurses to work with both nursing and non-nursing entities to ensure their expertise is recognized and incorporated. AAACN and its members must seek inclusion and proactively advocate for the value of ambulatory care RNs' contributions within the broader context of health care delivery and opportunities presented by state and federal government-sponsored innovation programs, including grant-funded research, community focused and cross-continuum care modalities, and research dissemination. Hence, AAACN recognizes the evolution of the ambulatory care RN in clinical practice, education, research, and leadership. AAACN envisions a future where the ambulatory care RN in clinical practice, education, research, and leadership.

### Clinical Practice

- Assumes the role of an expert in ambulatory nursing care and billing provider, and as independent and collaborative health care clinicians who provide a broad range of services under their full scope of practice.
- Leads, participates in, and supports quality improvement activities designed to implement evidence-based practices; enhanced access to care, improved availability of services; awareness of new care delivery models; and to ensure health equity.

- Implements ambulatory care orientation programs for new nurses and experienced nurses to transition to ambulatory care practice.
- Creates work environments fostering joy, engagement, collaboration, and communication that facilitates and optimizes the role of the ambulatory RN.
- Leads and participates in care delivery innovation, integrating ambulatory care expertise within payor models of reimbursement and care management, as part of startup and technology companies, and as consultants working to improve and broadly disseminate ambulatory care knowledge.

## Education

- Designs and implements undergraduate and graduate curriculum to prepare nurses for roles in ambulatory care. This requires that academic nurse faculty recognize and acknowledge ambulatory care and the rising number of individuals and populations managed in ambulatory care settings.
- Engages in continuing education that includes ambulatory care competencies and recognition of diverse settings of care.
- Promotes, cultivates, and establishes academic, health system, and community partnerships that enable the implementation of diverse clinical placements to optimize RN student experiences.
- Designs, implements, and evaluates academic practice partnerships to ensure RN preparedness for entry to practice in ambulatory care settings.

## Leadership

- Promotes the maximal scope of practice allowable by licensure and competencies. Leadership is responsible for optimizing the professional role of the ambulatory care RN (Berkowitz, 2017), commensurate with the education, training, and expertise of the individual.
- Assumes a leadership role in the transformation of health care in ambulatory care settings.
- Strives to influence both nurse and non-nurse leaders on the role value of the ambulatory care RN as integral to value-based models of care delivery.
- Collaborates with health care systems, government, and commercial third-party payers.
- Advocates in the creation, design, and implementation of quality systems.
- Addresses shortfalls in the nursing workforce, advocates for nurse residency programs, and ensures the optimal availability of an ambulatory care RN workforce.

## AAACN's Position

The future of nursing includes maximizing the role of ambulatory care RNs in a dynamic health care environment. AAACN supports the continuous advancement of nursing practice, education, research, and leadership in its efforts to provide the highest value care to patients, families, and communities.

AAACN affirms that the ambulatory care RN is an expert in ambulatory care nursing who must be equitably compensated for the care they provide to individuals, families, and populations

of interest. The ambulatory care RN develops and implements evidence-based innovations, with an aim toward reducing barriers to expanded access, availability, and affordability of care to all through the continuous evolution and advancement of ambulatory care nursing.

## Conclusion

The future of ambulatory care nursing service delivery requires preparation, promotion, and recognition of the value of the ambulatory care RNs' contributions. Ambulatory care RNs are patient advocates who provide a necessary voice that drives patient-centered health policy based on evidence-based clinical practice and expertise.

Value-based optimal health outcomes are addressed by focusing on expanding, reorganizing, and improving ambulatory care nursing practice. AAACN strives to enhance the safety, quality, and effectiveness of care for individuals, families, communities, and populations of interest seeking care across ambulatory settings. AAACN is committed to ensuring the role of the ambulatory care RN is maximized independently and as an essential member of interprofessional teams. AAACN seeks to reach beyond traditional practice boundaries and partnerships by recognizing the ambulatory care RN as a clinical nursing expert that leads interprofessional teams in reducing disparities by providing safe, quality care that ensures access in diverse, low-resource, and technologically innovative ambulatory settings.

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*The American Academy of Ambulatory Care Nursing (AAACN) is the only association for practicing nurses and nursing leaders specialized in serving people in community and hospital-based outpatient care settings. AAACN supports RNs by providing programs that advance holistic and evidence-based patient care and by advocating for their essential role in the future of health care.*



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