

# Defining nursing

*def.* Nursing is...



Royal College  
of Nursing

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## Introduction

This definition of nursing forms part of a position statement published by the Royal College of Nursing, the professional association that acts as the collective voice of nursing in the UK. The full document *Defining Nursing* can be found on the RCN website at [www.rcn.org.uk](http://www.rcn.org.uk)

*Defining Nursing* describes why and how this definition was developed, and explains its key concepts. The document was prepared by a small steering group and incorporates the results of wide consultation and participation by RCN members and others. A review of published literature both from the UK and from other countries was undertaken, and a survey was carried out of all the members of the International Council of Nurses to identify definitions of nursing that have been developed in other countries. To ensure that the statement reflects the views of British nurses, and in particular RCN members, a Values Clarification Exercise was undertaken, the findings of which were used as a framework for developing the definition. The Steering Group undertook a consultation exercise on a draft of the document, and *Defining Nursing* has been amended to take account of the responses received. Definitions of nursing, like nursing itself, are dynamic; nursing is constantly evolving to meet new needs and take account of new knowledge. This document is only a beginning. Later in 2003 the RCN will undertake a survey, based on the work of Queensland Nursing Council, to validate the document and the definition.

The RCN expects that *Defining Nursing* will be useful to:

- ◆ describe nursing to people who do not understand it
- ◆ clarify the role of the nurse in the multidisciplinary health care team
- ◆ influence the policy agenda at local and national level
- ◆ develop educational curricula
- ◆ identify areas where research is needed to strengthen the knowledge base of nursing
- ◆ inform decisions about whether and how nursing work should be delegated to other personnel
- ◆ support negotiations at local and national level on issues such as nurse staffing, skill mix and nurses' pay.

## A definition of nursing

This definition of nursing is expressed in the form of a “core” supported by six “defining characteristics”<sup>1</sup>. It is important to recognise that nursing is the totality: while some parts of the definition are shared with other health care professions, the uniqueness of nursing lies in their combination. The definition takes account of the great diversity of nursing, which includes the care of people who are healthy as well as those who are sick, and of groups of people as well as individuals. The definition expresses the common core of nursing which remains constant.

1. **Defining characteristic:** A characteristic which is indispensable to understanding a concept and is used for delimiting the concept from other concepts (adapted from the International Organisation for Standardisation, ISO/TC 215/N 142 Health Informatics: vocabulary of terminology).

# Nursing is...

**The use of clinical judgement in the provision of care to enable people to improve, maintain, or recover health, to cope with health problems, and to achieve the best possible quality of life, whatever their disease or disability, until death.**

## **Its defining characteristics are:**

1. A particular purpose: the purpose of nursing is to promote health, healing, growth and development, and to prevent disease, illness, injury, and disability. When people become ill or disabled, the purpose of nursing is, in addition, to minimise distress and suffering, and to enable people to understand and cope with their disease or disability, its treatment and its consequences. When death is inevitable, the purpose of nursing is to maintain the best possible quality of life until its end.
2. A particular mode of intervention: nursing interventions are concerned with empowering people, and helping them to achieve, maintain or recover independence. Nursing is an intellectual, physical, emotional and moral process which includes the identification of nursing needs; therapeutic interventions and personal care; information, education, advice and advocacy; and physical, emotional and spiritual support. In addition to direct patient care, nursing practice includes management, teaching, and policy and knowledge development.
3. A particular domain: the specific domain of nursing is people's unique responses to and experience of health, illness, frailty, disability and health-related life events in whatever environment or circumstances they find themselves. People's responses may be physiological, psychological, social, cultural or spiritual, and are often a combination of all of these. The term "people" includes individuals of all ages, families and communities, throughout the entire life span.
4. A particular focus: the focus of nursing is the whole person and the human response rather than a particular aspect of the person or a particular pathological condition.
5. A particular value base: nursing is based on ethical values which respect the dignity, autonomy and uniqueness of human beings, the privileged nurse-patient relationship, and the acceptance of personal accountability for decisions and actions. These values are expressed in written codes of ethics, and supported by a system of professional regulation.
6. A commitment to partnership: nurses work in partnership with patients, their relatives and other carers, and in collaboration with others as members of a multi-disciplinary team. Where appropriate they will lead the team, prescribing, delegating and supervising the work of others; at other times they will participate under the leadership of others. At all times, however, they remain personally and professionally accountable for their own decisions and actions.

## Conclusion

The ability of nursing to respond to people's need for nursing within the rapidly changing environment of health care depends on:

- ◆ the way in which nursing work is organised in health care delivery systems
- ◆ the way in which nursing practice is regulated and the quality of care is assured
- ◆ the way in which practitioners are prepared.

And, fundamentally, depends on

- ◆ the way in which nursing itself is defined.

The International Council of Nurses makes clear that:

“National nursing organisations bear the responsibility for defining nursing and nurses' roles that are consistent with accepted international definitions and relevant to their nation's health care needs.”<sup>2</sup>

Defining Nursing represents the RCN's recognition and acceptance of this responsibility and its response to the challenge.

2. International Council of Nurses (1998) *Scope of nursing practice*. Geneva: ICN.

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Andrew Salmon became a member of the Defining Nursing Workgroup in April 2002 when he took on the role of Research Assistant, in a voluntary capacity.

Tragically, after a short illness, Andrew Salmon died on 2 February 2003. Andrew's professionalism and friendship were greatly valued by the other members of the workgroup. Thanks to Andrew's skills, vision and determination, the values of today's nurses have been successfully integrated into our report. Andrew Salmon made an enormous contribution to our work. He will be fondly remembered and greatly missed by us all.

## Further information

The full document *Defining Nursing* can be found on the RCN website at [www.rcn.org.uk](http://www.rcn.org.uk), or you can call RCN Direct on 0845 772 6100 and quote publication code 001 998.

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