

## **Critical Care**

Critical care nursing is that specialty within nursing that deals specifically with human responses to life-threatening problems. A critical care nurse is a licensed professional nurse who is responsible for ensuring that acutely and critically ill patients and their families receive optimal care.

### **The critically ill patient**

Critically ill patients are defined as those patients who are at high risk for actual or potential life-threatening health problems. The more critically ill the patient is, the more likely he or she is to be highly vulnerable, unstable and complex, thereby requiring intense and vigilant nursing care.

### **History of critical care nursing**

Although there have always been very ill and severely injured patients, the concept of critical care is relatively modern. As advances have been made in medicine and technology, patient care has become more complex.

To provide appropriate care, nurses needed specialized knowledge and skills, and the care delivery mechanisms needed to evolve to support the patients' needs for continuous monitoring and treatment. The first intensive care units emerged in the 1950s to provide care to very ill patients who needed one-to-one care from a nurse. From this environment the specialty of critical care nursing emerged.

### **Where critical care nurses work**

According to "The Registered Nurse Population" study, 56.2% of all nurses work in a hospital setting, and critical care nurses work wherever critically ill patients are found — intensive care units, pediatric ICUs, neonatal ICUs, cardiac care units, cardiac catheter labs, telemetry units, progressive care units, emergency departments and recovery rooms. Increasingly, critical care nurses work in home healthcare, managed care organizations, nursing schools, outpatient surgery centers and clinics.

### **What critical care nurses do**

Critical care nurses practice in settings where patients require complex assessment, high-intensity therapies and interventions, and continuous nursing vigilance. Critical care nurses rely upon a specialized body of knowledge, skills and experience to provide care to patients and families and create environments that are healing, humane and caring. Foremost, the critical care nurse is a patient advocate.

AACN defines advocacy as respecting and supporting the basic values, rights and beliefs of the critically ill patient. In this role, critical care nurses:

- Respect and support the right of the patient or the patient's designated surrogate to autonomous informed decision making.
- Intervene when the best interest of the patient is in question.
- Help the patient obtain necessary care.
- Respect the values, beliefs and rights of the patient.
- Provide education and support to help the patient or the patient's designated surrogate make decisions.
- Represent the patient in accordance with the patient's choices.
- Support the decisions of the patient or designated surrogate, or transfer care to an equally qualified critical care nurse.
- Intercede for patients who cannot speak for themselves in situations that require immediate action.
- Monitor and safeguard the quality of care the patient receives.
- Act as a liaison between the patient, the patient's family and other healthcare professionals.

## **The roles of critical care nurses**

Critical care nurses work in a wide variety of settings, filling many roles including bedside clinicians, nurse educators, nurse researchers, nurse managers, clinical nurse specialists and nurse practitioners. With the onset of managed care and the resulting migration of patients to alternative settings, critical care nurses are caring for patients who are more ill than ever before. Managed care has also fueled a growing demand for advanced practice nurses in the acute care setting.

Advanced practice nurses are those who have received advanced education at the master's or doctoral level. In the critical care setting, they are most frequently clinical nurse specialists (CNS) or acute care nurse practitioners (ACNP).

A CNS is an expert clinician in a particular specialty — critical care in this case. The CNS is responsible for the identification, intervention and management of clinical problems to improve care for patients and families. They provide direct patient care, including assessing, diagnosing, planning and prescribing pharmacological and nonpharmacological treatment of health problems.

ACNPs in the critical care setting focus on making clinical decisions related to complex patient care. Their activities include risk appraisal, interpretation of diagnostic tests and providing treatment, which may include prescribing medication.

## **Level of education for critical care nurses**

To become a registered nurse (RN), an individual must earn a diploma in nursing, an associate's degree in nursing (ADN) or a bachelor's degree in nursing (BSN) and pass a national licensing exam. Requirements vary as dictated by each state's Board of Nursing. Many nursing schools offer students exposure to critical care, but most of a critical care nurse's specialty education and orientation is provided by the employer. Advanced practice nurses must earn a degree at the master's or doctoral level.