Are Nurse Practitioners and Advanced Practice Nurses the Answer to a Physician Shortage?

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Abstract

Nurses have always been an indispensable resource in providing medical care. The expansion of nursing roles has been driven by both a need for primary care providers and advanced educational opportunities for registered nurses. As a result, nurse practitioners (NPs) and advanced practice nurses (APNs) are providing more autonomous care and making more independent decisions than ever before. Many nurses are no longer providing nursing care, but are providing primary care.

According to the American Academy of Nurse Practitioners, NPs and APNs can diagnose and manage most common and many chronic illnesses, either independently or as part of a health care team. Today, about 103,000 nurse practitioners work in the US. Services provided by nurse practitioners include, but in many instances are not limited to, ordering, conducting and interpreting diagnostic and laboratory tests; prescribing medication and therapies; and teaching and counseling patients and their families.

There is clearly a disparity in the amount of training between the nurse practitioner and the physician. Nurse practitioners desire the same practice privileges as physicians with a fraction of the training. Nurse practitioners do not have the clinical background to diagnose and treat as comprehensively as a physician. Nurse practitioners are clearly not trained adequately for independent practice in primary care. To ensure patient safety, physician supervision is essential.