

# RCN New Definition of Nursing

CLINICAL PROFESSIONAL RESOURCE



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This summary explanation aims to provide the background to developing the revised definition of nursing in support of the Professional Framework. It explains the reasons for the choice of language terms and the emphasis placed on the definition.

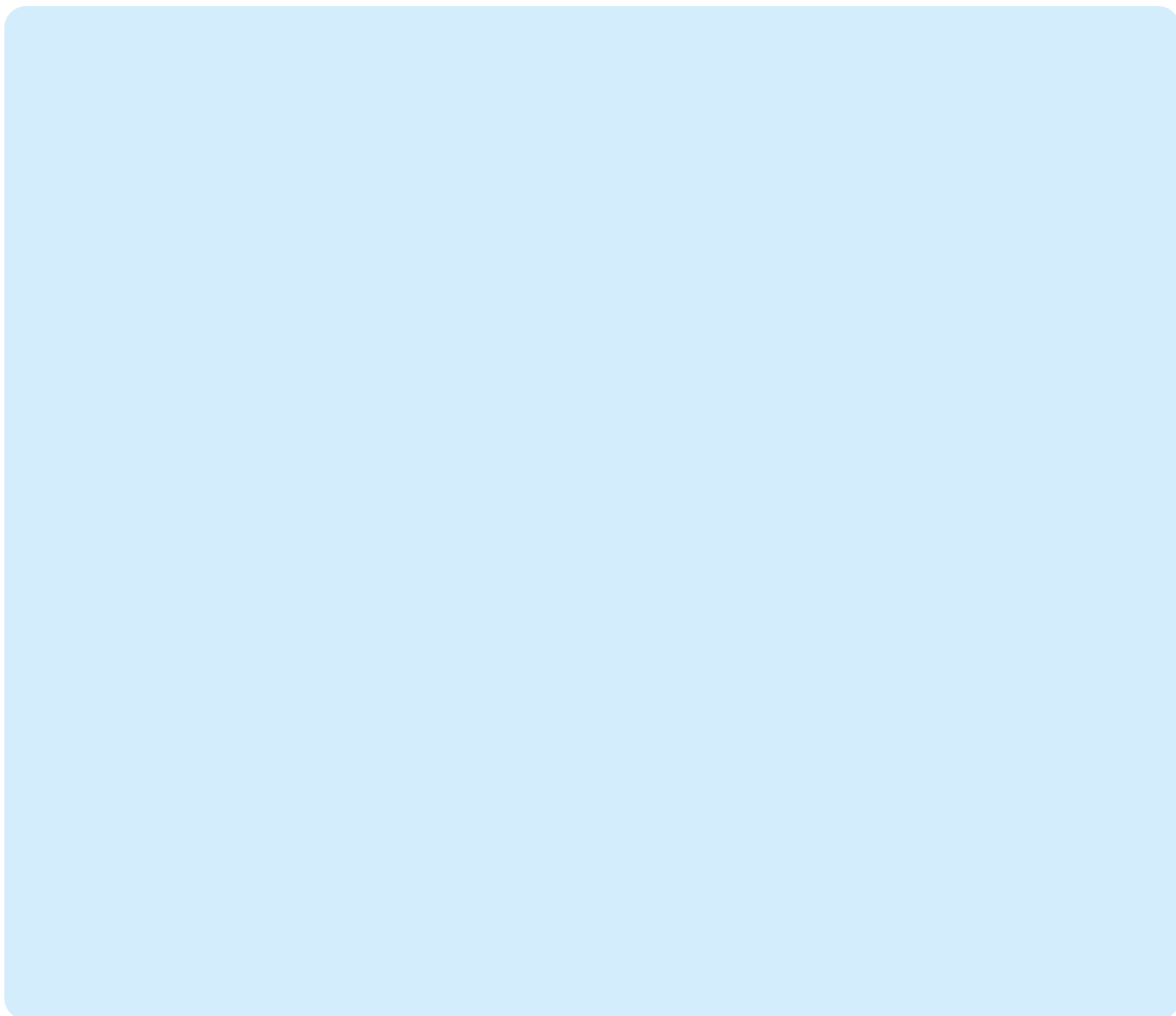
There is currently no UK-wide Professional Framework for Nursing, which has been identified as a priority for The Royal College of Nursing (RCN) to address. It is also aligned with the RCN priorities (RCN Plan, 2022) to amplify the voice of nursing to influence policy and practice and to showcase the transformation of the nursing practice that is fit for the future. The development of the first overarching UK Professional Framework for nursing will promote the advancement of nursing as a profession, demonstrate the science and art of nursing, and the education and training opportunities to support the provision of modern health and social care and support the recruitment and retention of the nursing workforce.

Nursing as a profession has continuously modernised through the development of professional knowledge, extending the sphere of its responsibilities and the scope and definition of nursing roles (Jackson et al., 2021). An updated definition of nursing was needed to reflect the progression of the nursing profession that underpins the Professional Framework. The revised definition communicates to all stakeholders, including the public, policymakers, educationalists, registered nurses, and the wider nursing team, how nursing is defined in the context of contemporary health and social care. Particular attention has been paid to the language used in the definition and this supporting explanation.

The question of what nursing is and how to articulate it is one that the profession has found hard to answer and is a central theme of many academic papers (Jackson et al., 2021). The current definitions in Box 1 all capture aspects of nursing but predate many significant changes in the profession, for example, becoming a graduate workforce in 2013 (Saghafi et al. 2023). A central principle of a graduate workforce is critical thinking required as a core part of increasingly complex nursing practice (Saghafi et al. 2023) and the recognition of the vigilant and essential role nursing plays in patient safety and the advances in technology (Aitken et al. 2017; Olds et al. 2017).

There is compelling evidence that nursing is seen by the public as a caring and the most trusted profession in the UK (Ipsos 2020; Girvin and Jackson 2021). However, the public's understanding of nursing work is more limited and is informed by images presented in the media and a tone of sentimentality in the narrative used to describe nursing (Girvin et al. 2021; Leary 2017).

Historically, as a profession, we have tended to speak about the values that nursing holds rather than the work that nursing does that is underpinned by the profession's values (Horton et al. 2007). This has contributed to obscuring the full range of nursing knowledge and skills that the profession contributes, with much of nursing work being unrecognised; this gives rise to the misinterpretation of nursing as being only assistive, task-focused



## Nursing Work

The nature of nursing work has been studied in many ways throughout modern nursing. There is agreement that the work is complex and hard to articulate, meaning that nursing is poorly understood by others, including the public. There is a tendency to express nursing work in definitions of nursing and public narratives only through the concept that nurses are caring, and their purpose is to carry out caring work (Jackson et al., 2021). Nursing also tends to be silent in publicly highlighting the nature and impact of its work (Buresh and Gordon, 2013). The profession globally has many views on caring and how it is best achieved. Nursing is not

## What is meant by safety-critical?

Nursing is the largest safety-critical profession in health care (RCN Workforce Standards, 2021). The revised definition of nursing must articulate nursing work's impact on patient outcomes. The professional nurse work environment has adequate staffing, managerial support for nurses, and good nurse-physician relations (Olds et al. 2017; Aitken et al. 2017). Creating work environments that fully support nursing practice is critical to improving the safety and quality of patient care. In many settings, nursing staff work alongside a team of health and social care professionals to ensure the safety and highest level of care. However, it is nurses who understand the complexity of nursing care provision and the nursing workload. It is registered nurses and nursing support workers who provide nursing care.

The RCN guidance [The RCN Nursing Workforce Standards](#) sets out the evidence and experience demonstrating that having the right numbers of nursing staff, with the right skills, in the right place, at the right time improves health outcomes, the quality of care delivered, and patient safety.

## Why use the four pillars?

All nurses develop their skills, knowledge and capabilities, which are common across all levels of practice. Nurses also use their knowledge and clinical skills in education, research, and leadership to provide safe, high-quality, person-centred care. Together,



## What is meant by evidence-based knowledge?

The nature of nursing work makes clear that nursing involves cognitive work. This cognitive work involves problem-solving and planning care based on contemporary evidence.

The needs of the population in the 21st century have continuously changed, as has the development of the nursing profession (Jackson et al., 2021). The publication of the previous definition of nursing predates nursing becoming a graduate profession in 2013; the revised definition needs to reflect the capabilities expected of nursing that are provided by an integrated team and led by a graduate workforce.

Graduate preparation means that registered nurses can apply theoretical knowledge to practice. Health practises may be subject to rapid development and improvements, meaning that the knowledge to manage care risks safely and effectively also changes rapidly. Therefore, registered nurses need to understand how to evaluate knowledge and practice and why different types of knowledge may be needed to be able to nurse safely. Nursing safely and being vigilant to the safety needs of patients also requires the ability to apply ethical and professional behaviour. Registrsl.2 Ti

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## What are the principles of nursing practice?

The Principles of Nursing are applicable to all in the nursing workforce. The principles describe what everyone, from nursing staff to people and populations, can expect from nursing to deliver safe and effective nursing care. They cover the aspects of behaviour, attitude and approach that underpin good care and are mapped to and comply with the [NMC Code](#).

Safe and effective care based on the Principles of Nursing will consider how compassionate and fundamental aspects of professional care might be met. This assessment of the needs of a person is informed by taking a person-centred approach, which also requires further consideration of the relevant evidence base and the use of professional judgement (Kitson A, Athlin A and Conroy T, 2014; Feo R, Kitson A and Conroy T, 2018).



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