The National Association of NURSE PRACTITIONERS in WOMEN'S HEALTH

POSITION STATEMENT

The Doctor of Nursing Practice for Women's Health Nurse Practitioners

The National Association of Nurse Practitioners in Women's Health (NPWH) supports the continuing evolution of the Doctor of Nursing Practice (DNP) degree as entry level for women's health nurse practitioners (WHNPs). During the transition, study of the impact of DNP education on quality, access, and cost of healthcare should be ongoing. Furthermore, NPWH advocates for concerted strategies to maintain an adequate number of highly qualified WHNPs to meet the healthcare needs of individuals and communities.

BACKGROUND

In October 2004, the American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN) published a position paper with the recommendation to transition the entry-level degree for advanced practice registered nurses (APRNs) from the master's degree to the DNP by the year 2015.[1] The AACN position paper outlined several trends to support the need for a practice doctorate for advanced nursing practice. These trends include continuing expansion of scientific knowledge, technology and informatics advances, increasing complexity of healthcare systems, the need for improved patient outcomes, and the need for parity with other healthcare professionals.

Based on the AACN's 2006 *Essentials of Doctoral Education for Advanced Nursing Practice*, DNP curricula go beyond that of master's programs.[2] DNP programs prepare APRNs as leaders in evidence-based practice, quality improvement, systems thinking, and clinical scholarship. DNP curricula provide critical learning in the areas of informatics and technology, healthcare policy and advocacy, population health, and interprofessional collaboration to improve healthcare.

The Institute of Medicine (IOM) 2011 report, *The Future of Nursing: Leading Change, Advancing Health*, recognized that more will be expected of the APRN as the healthcare system grows in complexity, scientific knowledge continues to expand, and technology advances.[3] APRNs will need competence in aspects of healthcare that require additional coursework and aligned clinical experiences. Further, the IOM report recognized the importance of DNP-prepared APRNs as clinical scholars who translate research and positively affect individual and population health outcomes at organizational and systems levels.

Although the transition to the entry-level degree for all APRNs from the master's degree to the DNP did not take place in 2015, the number of DNP programs significantly increased. The National Organization of Nurse Practitioner Faculties (NONPF) affirmed a continuing commitment to advancing the DNP degree as entry level for the NP role.[4] Further, NONPF

recommended that all NP programs provide a post-baccalaureate to DNP with a seamless, integrated curriculum that prepares graduates with NP core competencies, population-focused competencies, and competencies of the DNP Essentials.[2,5,6,7] AACN published a white paper in 2015 clarifying recommendations for implementation of the DNP and distinguishing practice-focused scholarship and research-focused scholarship.[8]

Despite some expected challenges to full implementation, in 2018, NONPF reaffirmed the commitment to move all entry-level NP education to the DNP degree by 2025.[9,10] In a 2019 white paper, AACN described a vision for academic nursing that includes the DNP as the minimum academic degree for APRNs and all other areas of advanced nursing practice that encompass direct and indirect care and services.[11] To further this vision, in 2021, AACN released revised Essentials, focusing on a competency-based educational framework for entry to practice and advanced practice.[12] NONPF developed population-focused competencies aligned with the new Essentials as well as an implementation guide to assist academic programs with implementation.[13,14]

SIGNIFICANCE TO WOMEN'S HEALTHCARE AND WHNP PRACTICE

NPWH affirms that master's and certificate programs have fully prepared WHNPs with the competencies required to provide safe, quality healthcare for women. NPWH also recognizes the growing complexity of healthcare environments and the continuously expanding body of scientific knowledge regarding women's health and healthcare needs. DNP education provides WHNPs with advanced competencies significant to providing women's healthcare and enhancing NP practice.

Women benefit when WHNPs are prepared with the highest level of scientific knowledge and the ability to translate that knowledge quickly and effectively into evidence-based practice. Proficiency in leading quality improvement strategies, policy initiatives, and evaluation processes that create and sustain positive change at organizational, health systems, and community levels leads to improved health outcomes. Advanced preparation in the interprofessional dimension of healthcare enables WHNPs to facilitate collaborative team functioning. DNP-prepared WHNPs provide a critical interface between practice, research, and policy, with a focus on women's health.

NPWH also recognizes challenges that must be addressed regarding the move to the DNP as entry level for WHNP practice. The DNP degree will require longer educational programs that add to educational costs. Longer educational programs may also slow the number of WHNPs prepared to meet national healthcare shortages. As well, financial gain for the WHNP who is prepared at the DNP level is not guaranteed.

CONSIDERATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Advancing entry-level education to the DNP degree will facilitate the implementation of best evidence into practice

The DNP curriculum for the WHNP population focus must incorporate the WHNP *Guidelines for Practice and Education*.[15]

NPWH and other APRN organizations must collaborate to address the challenges presented in making the transition to the DNP as entry into practice for APRNs in an informed and equitable manner.

NPWH and other APRN organizations must participate in and support research to study the impact of DNP education on quality, access, and cost of healthcare.

NPWH will continue to advocate at organizational and legislative levels to ensure that policies and regulations support practice at the full scope of education and training for all WHNPs.

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