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Deborah C. Gray
Old Dominion University, dcgray@odu.edu

Melanie Rogers

Minna K. Miller

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Advanced practice nursing initiatives in Africa, moving towards the nurse practitioner role: Experiences from the field

Deborah C. Gray RN, FNP-C, ANP-BC, MSc, DNP, FAANP, FAAN^{1,2}  | Melanie Rogers RN, ANP, BSc, MSc, PhD, FHEA, Queens Nurse^{3,4} | Minna K. Miller RN, NP(F), FNP-BC, MSN, DNP, FAANP^{5,6,7}

¹Clinical Associate Professor, Associate Director Graduate Nursing Programs, School of Nursing, Old Dominion University, Norfolk, Virginia, USA

²Deputy Director, ICN Nurse Practitioner/Advanced Practice Nurse Network Global Academy of Research and Enterprise, Geneva, Switzerland

³Professor of Advanced Practice, Department of Nursing and Midwifery, University of Huddersfield, Huddersfield, UK

⁴Director, ICN Nurse Practitioner/Advanced Practice Nurse Network Global Academy of Research and Enterprise, Geneva, Switzerland

⁵Nurse Practitioner, Department of Pediatrics, Division of Respiratory Medicine, BC Children's Hospital, Vancouver, Canada

⁶Adjunct Professor, School of Nursing, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada

⁷Project Coordinator, ICN Nurse Practitioner/Advanced Practice Nurse Network Core Steering Group, Geneva, Switzerland

Correspondence

Deborah C. Gray, RN, FNP-C, ANP-BC, MSc, DNP, FAANP, FAAN, 2860 Wood Duck Drive, Virginia Beach, VA 23456.
Email: dcgray@odu.edu

Abstract

Aim: This paper discusses the development and progression of the advanced practice nurse practitioner role in Africa.

Background: Providing adequate primary health care is problematic in Africa. The World Health Organization and International Council of Nurses proposed that nurses, specifically advanced practice nurse practitioners with the requisite skills in disease prevention, diagnosis and management, can be key to solving the primary care issue.

Sources of evidence: This paper utilized publications from PUBMED, CINAHL, policy papers, websites, workgroups, conferences, and the experiences and knowledge of authors involved in leading and moving forward key events and projects.

Discussion: Four African countries have formally adopted the advanced practice nurse practitioner role, with significant interest from countries throughout Africa, and ever-increasing requests for assistance regarding initiation, development and integration of advanced practice roles. Initiatives to advance the roles have been supported by the International Council of Nurses Nurse Practitioner/Advanced Practice Nurse Network and Global Academy of Research and Enterprise. Next steps and projects for future role development are discussed.

Conclusions: There is a progression towards the adoption of the advanced practice nurse practitioner role in Africa, and further mechanisms are suggested to allow full uptake and utilization.

Implications for nursing practice: Prioritization and investment in initiatives implementing nurse practitioner/advanced practice nurse roles in Africa allows nurses to pursue further education, advanced role and leadership opportunities consistent with Nursing Now goals.

Implications for health policy: Implementation of nurse practitioner/advanced practice nurse roles increases the primary care workforce, consistent with recommendations and priorities in the World Health Organization Global Strategic Directions for Nursing and Midwifery 2021–2025 helping countries ensure that nurses optimally contribute to achieving universal health coverage and other population health goals.

KEYWORDS

Advanced Practice Nurse, Advanced Practice Nursing, Africa, global health, global nursing, health policy, international advanced practice nursing, Nurse Practitioner, primary health care, regulation

AIM

The purpose of this experience from the field paper is to discuss the progression of the Advanced Practice Nurse (APN) role in Africa, specifically the nurse practitioner (NP) role. A primary focus of this paper is on the events supported by the International Council of Nurses Nurse Practitioner/Advanced Practice Nurse (ICN NP/APN) Network and Global Academy of Research and Enterprise, also highlighting the current state of advanced practice NP role development and potential next steps for the future. The overall aim of this paper is to not only inform but also to promote further interest and support for the development of the NP/APN role in Africa, which ultimately will improve patient access to care and health outcomes, advancing the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) of ensuring health and well-being for vulnerable populations throughout the continent toward universal health coverage.

BACKGROUND

Providing adequate health care is an ever-increasing problem among countries in Africa, where 85% of countries have a majority of the population with little to no access to essential health services (World Health Organization [WHO], 2022). A shortage of health care workforce, particularly in primary health care, has been identified as one of the most crippling factors contributing to this lack of access, as well as resulting in devastatingly poor health outcomes (Mash et al., 2018; WHO, 2018). Advanced nursing practice 'is a field of nursing that extends and expands the boundaries of nursing's scope of practice' and the NP is 'an advanced practice nurse who integrates clinical skills associated with nursing and medicine in order to assess, diagnose, and manage patients in primary care healthcare settings and acute care populations as well as ongoing care for populations with chronic illness' (International Council of Nurses [ICN], 2020, p. 6).

The WHO (2020) and ICN (2020) have proposed that nurses, who comprise the largest and most widely distributed proportion of the health care workforce in Africa (WHO, 2019), and more specifically NPs with the requisite skills in disease prevention, diagnosis and management, are key to solving the primary care issue. These and other international organizations have proposed recommendations for countries, policy makers and other stakeholders to implement regulatory pathways and programs for nurses to maximize education and practice competencies that drive progress in primary health care and universal coverage (ICN, 2020; WHO, 2021). Further, the World Bank (2021) also recently made recommendations that countries throughout Africa develop, strengthen and invest in advanced practice nursing roles with the skills to address health care system challenges, particularly in primary care, and improve population health outcomes in the region.

Several countries in Africa have begun to show interest in advanced practice nursing, specifically in developing the NP role as a potential solution to their population-specific primary health care needs. However, there has been

much confusion both within Africa and worldwide regarding advanced practice nursing, particularly the NP role, education needed, necessary policy regulations, as well as best practices for implementation and integration (Beauchesne et al., 2020; Ladd et al., 2020; Sastre-Fullana et al., 2020). Countries ready to embrace the NP role have been unsure how to do so and have identified a need for guidance. In response to this need, the ICN NP/APN Network, and Global Academy of Research and Enterprise, as well as several other stakeholders began a journey to assist and facilitate this process. In this paper, we share our experiences from the field while discussing the progression and current state of the NP role in Africa, with a focus on the events and initiatives supported by the ICN NP/APN Network and Global Academy of Research and Enterprise.

Sources of evidence

To chronicle the development of the NP role across Africa, this paper utilizes information from publications, workgroups, conferences and policy papers and also draws upon the experiences and knowledge of several ICN NP/APN Network and Global Academy of Research and Enterprise members involved in leading and moving forward the Anglophone Africa Advanced Practice Nurse Coalition and key subsequent and ongoing events and projects.

DISCUSSION

ICN NP/APN Network and Global Academy of Research and Enterprise

The ICN NP/APN Network endeavors to support the development, visibility and practice of NPs and all APN specialties globally. The network is a volunteer organization comprised of over 4000 NP/APN members, from 121 countries. It provides collaboration and expertise in a supportive role to help guide the development of NP/APN roles, with members contributing their expertise including extensive knowledge and experience in advanced practice nursing education, regulation, research, leadership and standards of practice. In 2020, the ICN NP/APN Network launched the Global Academy of Research and Enterprise. The aim of the academy is to develop and support NP/APN research and enterprise 'in order to advance and disseminate advanced practice roles' (ICN NP/APN Network, 2022, para 1). Key to its work is developing collaborations, which will strengthen and support the expansion of NP/APN boundaries, challenge health care inequalities and strategically impact local, national and international policy. In order for NP/APNs to have the leverage and influence needed to expand, empirical data that have a global focus are paramount.

As the first Global NP/APN Academy of its kind, the aim is to provide international leadership from influential and experienced NP/APNs who have a passion for research and enterprise. The academy leadership is working to address



some of the research gaps and develop enterprise projects that are needed to harness the development of NP/APNs across the world. The academy's research is currently focused on identifying and rectifying the global gaps in advanced practice nursing research, thereby promoting nursing and strengthening health systems. NP/APNs are often an underutilized workforce who have the potential to make significant progress in addressing health inequalities, universal health coverage and sustainable development goals (Rosa et al., 2020). As the ICN APN Guidelines (2020) identify, it is vital to ensure study and further exploration of regulation, education and ongoing research between countries and within countries to further develop and enhance NP/APN roles and practice. The academy aims to fill this gap.

Early sub-Saharan Africa advanced practice nurse practitioner role development

There have been exciting developments across sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) in relation to advanced nursing practice and NP role development over the past 40 years. This has increased more recently due to disparities in health provision many rural communities face, the ongoing shortage of medical practitioners and the inequitable distribution of health workforce in SSA (Christmals & Armstrong, 2019; Dlamini et al., 2018). The APN role, specifically the NP role, was initially adopted in Africa by Botswana in the early 1980s to remedy the acute primary health care provider shortage stemming from the abrupt creation of a decentralized public health system in the largely rural country, after independence from the United Kingdom. Initially educated at the post-diploma level, and now at the Masters level, Botswana has the highest number of practicing NPs on the continent and serves as the model for NP education, regulation and uptake in Africa (Geyer & Christmals, 2020; Gray et al., 2023). Additionally, Eswatini also had some early formal progression and establishment of the NP role. Initially, Eswatini, or Swaziland as it was then known, had an early NP certificate programme but graduates were not educated, nor functioning at the advanced practice level. However, to meet health care needs in the country, education and scope of practice for the role needed to be upscaled and expanded. Thus, after a decade of strategic planning and curriculum development, the University of Eswatini officially approved the country's first MSc Family Nurse Practitioner (FNP) programme in 2017 focusing on health care across the lifespan. Concurrent regulatory changes in 2017 by the Eswatini Nursing Council also legitimized and expanded MSc FNP practice (Anglophone Africa, 2018; Dlamini et al., 2020). Ghana also developed its initial nurse practitioner programme in 2001 and licensed the first NPs in 2015; however, further regulatory mechanisms to allow graduates to pursue advanced practice clinical roles and full scope of practice are still needed (Christmals, 2021; Christmals & Armstrong, 2020). Most recently, Kenya has developed guidelines for Advanced Nurse Practitioner education at the MSc level (Nursing Council of Kenya, 2022a), as well as a formalized

scope of practice for the advanced nurse practitioner (Nursing Council of Kenya, 2022b) and is currently planning to implement a structure for licensing of NPs (E. Tallam-Kimaiyo, personal communication 2 September 2022). Otherwise, since 2017, no additional countries in Africa have formalized the NP role (Wheeler et al., 2022). There is, however, significant interest throughout SSA and an ever-increasing recognition of the need for the initiation, development and integration of advanced practice nursing, specifically the NP role.

Anglophone Africa Advanced Practice Nurse Coalition (AAPNC) and collaboration (2017–2018)

The AAPNC was developed in 2017, initiated by ICN NP/APN Network members and a group of interested stakeholders to start a dialogue about how to coordinate a global initiative that supports the development of advanced practice nursing and the NP role in Africa. This coalition was comprised of over 50 international and national nursing organization representatives: chief nurses; regulatory representatives; academics; and nursing, medical, and other health care practitioners active in nursing and primary health care policy in Africa. The AAPNC developed a comprehensive report and proposal that included a summary of the status of advanced practice nursing throughout anglophone Africa, and also made recommendations for overall policy and workforce planning to address the needs in the region. Final recommendations of the AAPNC Report included:

- ICN and WHO facilitate regional platforms to co-ordinate advanced practice work across the continent and act as a hub to build on existing examples and minimize duplication of efforts.
- A robust clinical governance structure be developed, including structured clinical supervision and continuing professional development arrangements at organizational/country level in the development of APN roles.
- Ensure strong leadership across relevant executive boards to align APN roles with policy priorities; partner with academic institutions, private sector, nongovernmental organizations and policy makers.
- Develop APN roles and programs based on four pillars of advanced practice: clinical practice, education, research and leadership.
- Adapt the Advanced Practice Registered Nurse Consensus model to define APN roles across countries in Africa. Develop context-specific models across the continent, allowing for mobility and portability of skills and knowledge.
- Ensure Interprofessional Education and Collaborative Practice (IPECP) in education and clinical practice, putting the patient at the center. Apply principles of the WHO framework on integrated people-centered health services (IPCHS).



- Apply evidence-based frameworks in APN development, e.g., the participatory, evidence-based, patient-focused process for implementation of the Advanced Practice Nursing Framework (Bryant-Lukosius & Dencso, 2004) and the Conceptual Policy Framework for Advanced Practice Nursing (Schober, 2017).⁷ (AAPNC, 2018, p. 5).

Subsequent NP/APN Africa Events (2019–2021)

After publication, the recommendations from the AAPN Coalition Report (2018) were highlighted in the International Council of Nurses Global Guidelines on Advanced Practice Nursing (2020). Furthermore, additional discussions regarding the development of the NP role in Africa that were led by ICN NP/APN Network members took place within Africa at several large multicountry stakeholder events, including (1) the Lead Nurse Africa Leadership Conference in Accra, Ghana in April 2019; (2) the AfriPEN/WONCA FNP Africa Curriculum and Policy Workshop in Nairobi, Kenya July 2019; (3) the AFRO-Primary Health Care Conference held virtually in September 2020; and (4) the Afro FNP/APN Educational Leadership Symposium: Towards a Regional FNP Framework in Africa, also held virtually in November 2020.

These forums prompted the ICN Network Global Academy of Research and Enterprise to hold further consensus-building meetings with national nursing leaders and other international stakeholder organizations. This resulted in subsequent specific requests for ICN NP/APN Network assistance with the initiation of the FNP role, from countries wishing to initiate the role, or in various stages of developing the role, including Botswana, Eswatini, Ghana, Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania, South Africa, Uganda, Zimbabwe, Malawi and others. However, at this point, no mechanism was in place to provide this requested assistance to these and other countries in Africa. Hence, the Africa Advanced Practice/Nurse Practitioner Implementation Project was envisioned.

Africa Advanced Practice/Nurse Practitioner Implementation Project

The Africa Advanced Practice/Nurse Practitioner Implementation Project has been proposed by the ICN NP/APN Network to continue and operationalize the previous work towards the development of the NP role, and ultimately all APN roles, in Africa. It is an initiative that attempts to assist countries, by providing a structured plan working within countries to develop and implement advanced practice, and specifically NP roles across the African continent. As part of this project, the ICN NP/APN Network, and specifically the ICN NP/APN Network Global Academy of Research and Enterprise, with other potential partners and stakeholder groups, are working together to start an initiative offering support, expertise and sustainability success.

As envisioned, there are several recommendations and potential future steps for the project. Ideally, the first step of

the project is to conduct an updated situational and feasibility analysis, with a specific focus on the African countries that have either initiated the NP role, or actively indicate interest in developing the nurse practitioner role. Following this, one or more countries would be selected as a pilot for guidance from the ICN NP/APN Network members and the Global Academy. Finally, once initial pilot implementation is completed and after further evaluation and refinement, it is anticipated that the model utilized can be adapted across Africa, dependent on country needs.

Several key feasibility criteria are recommended in the literature (Dlamini, 2020; Geyer & Christmals, 2020; Schober, 2017) and from the author's experience for successful development and implementation of the NP role. First, countries must ideally have potential workforce resources and a demonstrated intention and need for the role. Also, to ensure feasibility, there should be evidence of support from the country's key stakeholders in all three areas essential for development including education, policy and regulation. Role acceptance and uptake from government health ministry and regulatory chief nursing positions; education/academia; and from nursing, medical, and health care sector organizations and employers are crucial for both successful role development and implementation.

CONCLUSIONS

Lack of primary care and basic health care services is an immense and pressing need in Africa. Nurses already comprise the largest and most widely distributed group of the existing health care workforce in the region. Models to educate nurses to provide quality advanced health care services including primary care, and to integrate them to meet health care needs in medically underserved areas have been successfully implemented in many regions of the world, as well as on a limited emerging basis in Africa. Currently, three countries in Africa have adopted the APN practitioner role, and in those countries, further mechanisms are needed to allow full uptake and utilization. Additionally, there has been significant interest from countries throughout Africa, and ever-increasing requests to the ICN NP/APN Network and Global Academy of Research and Enterprise for assistance regarding the initiation, development and integration of Advanced Practice Nursing roles, and specifically the nurse practitioner role in African countries. This paper examined the progression and current state of the APN practitioner role in Africa, with a focus on the events and initiatives supported by the International Council of Nurses Nurse Practitioner/APN Network and Global Academy of Research and Enterprise. Potential next steps for future successful NP role development including the planned Africa Advanced Practice/Nurse Practitioner Implementation Project may provide a means to improve patient access to care and health outcomes, advancing the SDG of ensuring health and well-being for vulnerable populations throughout the continent towards universal health coverage.



Implications for nursing practice

Nurses, comprising the majority of the health care workforce in Africa, and already providing much of the primary care for the continent (WHO, 2020), are uniquely positioned to fulfil the challenges associated with limited access to care, particularly in rural areas. Prioritization and investment in Advanced Practice Nursing and initiatives to implement NP/APN roles in the region will allow nurses to pursue further education, advanced role and leadership opportunities in line with Nursing Now goals, while also having a significant impact on health care outcomes for their patients.

Implications for health policy

The Africa Advanced Practice/Nurse Practitioner Implementation Project is a planned initiative working within countries to develop and implement NP/APN roles within countries across the continent to safely and effectively increase primary care workforce, consistent with recommendations in the World Bank, 2021 ESCA Report: Education and Labor Markets for Nurses. In addition, by improving access to care and overall health of vulnerable populations throughout the countries of Africa, this project also provides a mechanism to further implement priorities in the WHO Global Strategic Directions for Nursing and Midwifery 2021–2025 to guide countries and policy makers to provide structures that allow nurses and midwives to play a maximal role in achieving universal health coverage and other strategic global health goals.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Conception and design: DG, MM, MR; acquisition of information: DG, MR, MM; manuscript writing: DG, MR, MM; critical revisions: DG, MR, MM.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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ORCID

Deborah C. Gray RN, FNP-C, ANP-

BC, MSc, DNP, FAANP, FAAN  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0946-3939>

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