

# SAFEGUARDING THE PATIENT AND THE PROFESSION

## THE VALUE OF CRITICAL CARE NURSE CERTIFICATION

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### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

*Today's critically ill patients require heightened vigilance and extraordinarily intricate care. As skilled and responsible health professionals, the 403,000 critical care nurses in the United States must acquire the specialized knowledge and skills needed to provide this care and demonstrate their competence to the public, their employers and their profession. Recognizing that nurses can validate specialty competence through certification, this white paper from the American Association of Critical-Care Nurses and the AACN Certification Corporation puts forth a call to action for all who can influence and will benefit from certified nurses' contribution to patient care.*

American healthcare has reached yet another crossroads. Healthcare in the United States faces inescapable realities—reports of unsafe care, rising litigation, escalating costs and all in the face of a worsening nursing shortage that is predicted to become a national health crisis.

Concerned for their safety, consumers have become more informed and involved in healthcare than ever before. Cognizant of their obligation to the public, employers, regulators, legislators and healthcare professionals have zeroed in on one critical question: How can American healthcare consumers receive safe high-quality care from qualified professionals while, at the same time, efforts are underway to control healthcare costs?

As new illnesses and threats to the public's health emerge, new drugs and technologies extend life longer than ever before. But longer life brings greater likelihood of chronic illness and the paradox of "chronic critical illness." As new therapies and technologies come forward, the dynamic environments of critical care must evolve to accommodate them. This evolution is so far-reaching that critical care is no longer limited to an ICU or even to a traditional hospital.

Today's critically ill patients require heightened vigilance and extraordinarily intricate care from a team of highly skilled health professionals. As part of the nation's 2.2 million working registered nurses—of which 1.3 million work in hospitals—more than 400,000 critical care nurses represent nursing's largest specialized group. These nurses shoulder round-the-clock responsibility for planning, coordinating, providing and evaluating care needs that change minute by minute. Like their physician counterparts, nurses must draw from an expanding body of increasingly complex knowledge. Nurses simply must know more today in order to deliver safe and effective care to meet each patient's unique needs.

Like professionals in many other fields, the practice of nurses is regulated from the beginning. A state board of nursing awards an RN license upon satisfactory completion of a mandatory national examination. The RN license assures the public that a nurse has the required entry-level knowledge and skills to care for patients. Beginning nurses, however, are not typically prepared to care for critically ill patients. They must acquire specialized knowledge, skills and experience before they are competent to care for the nation's sickest and most vulnerable patients. Certification provides validation of such specialized knowledge, skills and experience.

Everyone in the healthcare equation—patients, employers, nurses—benefits from certification as a mark of excellence. Nurses, specialty certification boards and employers have a shared obligation to honor the public’s trust in assuring safe and effective care.

Certification becomes an important indicator to patients and employers that a nurse is qualified and competent in a specialty and has met rigorous requirements to achieve this expert credential. Employers can showcase certified staff and demonstrate to consumers that they have attracted the most skilled and experienced professionals. Nurses can position themselves for appropriate recognition and a keen sense of personal accomplishment.

## **A Call to Action**

Through this white paper and its supporting data, the American Association of Critical-Care Nurses and AACN Certification Corporation wish to foster continued dialog and research around the value that certification brings to healthcare. We urge that the public, employers and nurses work together to ensure that there is an adequate supply of qualified and experienced nurses to care for the nation’s most vulnerable patients. Appropriate support for critical professional resources, especially certification and continuing education, must be at the forefront of today’s local and national health agendas. Specific actions include:

### **For the Public**

- Become familiar with local hospital practices concerning nurse staffing, including nurse vacancies, employment of certified nurses and support for continuing education, certification and recertification. Use this knowledge when you make healthcare decisions.
- Verify that health plans are aware of nurse certification and consider it as a key factor in evaluating the quality of the care facilities with which they contract.
- Communicate to health providers the importance of consumers knowing the credentials of their caregivers.

### **For Employers**

- Expand a commitment to safety and quality in patient care through robust support of continuing education, certification and recertification for nurses.
- Demonstrate the value of this commitment through a dynamic internal and external communications program.
- Conduct studies to validate that certification contributes to better outcomes for your institution including nurse retention, increased job satisfaction and reduced turnover.

### **For Nurses**

- Protect critically ill patients by acquiring specialized knowledge and skills and demonstrate competence through certification.
- Identify yourself as certified on your name badge and when talking with patients, families, nurse colleagues and other health professionals.
- Recognize and support those who advocate for certification, continually widening the circle of advocates.