

Certification: A Confusing Term

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A common question among nurses learning the practice of infusion therapy is how do they become “certified” to do these special procedures. Registered nurses (RN) ask about certification for placing peripherally inserted central catheters (PICCs) while licensed practical/vocational nurses (LP/VN) are usually seeking a “certification” in general intravenous (IV) therapy. These questions usually indicate that the nurse’s scope of practice is expanding to include a new procedure and thus the need for establishing individual qualifications.

The word "certify" or "certification" is used by many organizations including national professional associations, state boards of nursing, and healthcare facilities. This variety of applications leads to confusion and misunderstanding.

The Infusion Nurses Certification Corporation administers certification in infusion therapy. Virtually all nursing specialties have a certification process from a national professional organization. After meeting the established criteria, the nurse takes an examination. Successful completion of these certification examinations indicates that one has mastered the knowledge and skill within that specialty. National certifications cover a wide body of knowledge within that specialty and are not oriented to a specific task, such as PICC insertion. This type of certification is portable from one organization to another and is recognized by federal, state, and private organizations.

Each nursing specialty organization can become a member of the American Board of Nursing Specialties, an organization dedicated to creating uniformity in nursing certification and to increasing public awareness of the value of certification. Consumer protection through national standards for specialty certification is their main goal. Learn more by visiting <http://www.nursingcertification.org>.

For LP/VNs, some state boards of nursing require a separate course of study in IV therapy after obtaining their license. These courses include a specific curriculum and requirements for clinical practice, often requiring as much as 30 to 40 hours to complete. Following completion of the outlined process, the nurse may be “certified” in IV therapy. Each nurse must know the requirements in the state where they work and ensure that they have met those requirements.

The National Association for Practical Nurse Education and Services currently offers two national certifications for LP/VNs and is collaborating with the Infusion Nurses Certification Corporation to create a national IV certification program. Learn more by visiting <http://napnes.org/certifications/index.html>

Hospitals, home care agencies, or other facilities may use “certification” to indicate that an individual nurse has met their internal criteria to perform a specific task or procedure. Commonly this involves a combination of attending a training class and passing a written test or lab practicum demonstration. This type of certification applies only to practice within that organization and has no meaning if the nurse moves to another place of employment. Some

hospitals have chosen to eliminate this word from their policies because of these limitations. (Gracey et al., 1996)

There may also be confusion between a true national nursing certification and a certificate program. Educational programs or courses may meet the criteria for providing continuing education and award a certificate of attendance or completion. This document indicates that one has completed the requirements for that course, but may not include any measurement of knowledge or skill.

Currently, the emphasis must be on competent practice of each individual nurse. A national certification in a given nursing specialty indicates a higher level of competence within that specialty. The Joint Commission places the responsibility for competency assessment with the employer.

Professional competence is defined as the “ability to function effectively in the tasks considered essential within a given profession.” (Alspach, 1996) *Actual* performance must be assessed, rather than just the *potential* for functioning effectively. The emphasis is on the ability to bring together all aspects of a given situation – what the nurse knows, what the nurse does, how the nurse does the work and their attitudes toward the work. According to the Joint Commission, competency assessment is “The review and documentation of an individual’s demonstrated ability to achieve the expectations stated in the job description or performance standards.” (Alspach, 1996) This implies all components of a job or role, rather than specific steps of a procedure.

When a new task is being added to the nurse’s scope of practice, competence with the new task must be documented. Using the example of PICC insertion, the complete process includes:

1. Meeting criteria established by the employer about skills and experience required to begin the learning process. Examples include requiring a specific number of years of experience with central venous catheter management or a documented high percent of success with venipuncture procedures.
2. Attend a continuing education course to learn the information necessary. This course should provide a certificate of attendance from an accredited provider of continuing education programs. This course is a certificate program, not a certification program.
3. Perform the task, under supervision, for the required number of times. Most hospitals require from 3 to 5 supervised successful PICC insertions.
4. Subsequent periodic competency assessment processes, which are usually dependent upon the outcomes of the PICC insertions performed.

This process can be confusing; therefore the words we use should be chosen to ensure clarity of the process and goals. Lynn Hadaway Associates, Inc. is a provider of continuing professional education and would offer a certificate after completion of our courses. However, we do not offer any form of a certification program.

References:

Alspach, J. G. (1996). Designing Competency Assessment Programs: A Handbook for Nursing and Health-related Professionals. Pensacola, FL: National Nursing Staff Development Organization.

Gracey, K., Haddad, N., Hagle, M., Hauff, N., Johnson-Wlaker, P., May, P., Oliver, C., Smiley, M., & West, K. (1996). Certification: Hospital versus national standards. Journal of Nursing Staff Development, 12(2), 93-97.



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