

Competency Standards and Educational Requirements for Specialist Breast Nurses in Australia

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There is substantial evidence that Specialist Breast Nurses (SBNs) make an important contribution to improved outcomes for women with breast cancer, by providing information and support and promoting continuity of care. However, a recent study has identified significant variation in how the role functions across individual nurses and settings, which is likely to contribute to varied outcomes for women with breast cancer. The project reported in this paper illustrates how a set of competency standards for SBNs were developed by the National Breast Cancer Centre. The competency standards were developed through a review of published literature and consultation with key stakeholders. The resulting SBN Competency Standards reflect the core domains and elements of SBN practice seen as integral to achieving optimal outcomes for women with breast cancer. This project identifies the SBN as a registered nurse who applies advanced knowledge of the health needs, preferences and circumstances of women with breast cancer to optimise the individual's health and well-being at various phases across the continuum of care, including diagnosis, treatment, rehabilitation, follow-up and palliative care. The five core domains of practice identified are: Supportive care; Collaborative care; Coordinated care; Information provision and education; and Clinical leadership.

A variety of education programs are currently available for nurses who wish to learn about breast cancer nursing. The majority of stakeholders consulted in this project agreed that a Graduate Diploma level of education is required at minimum in order for an SBN to develop the minimum level of competence required to perform the role. The evidence supports the view that as an advanced role, nurses practising as SBNs require high-quality programs of sufficient depth and scope to achieve the required level of competence.

Key words: specialist breast nurse; competency standards; education; breast cancer

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Introduction

In recent years, support for the role of the Specialist Breast Nurse (SBN) in the management of women with breast cancer in Australia has grown as a result of evidence of the benefits of this role from studies both within Australia (National Breast Cancer Centre Specialist Breast Nurse Project Team, 2002) and overseas (Clacey, Thomas & Pearson, 1988; Maguire, Brooke, Tait, Thomas & Sellwood, 1983; McArdle et al., 1996). SBNs provide valuable support and care coordination for women with breast cancer across the continuum of care. However, a recent comprehensive Victorian workforce study has identified significant variation in how the role functions across individual nurses and settings (The Victorian Centre for Nursing Practice Research, 2001). Such variation is likely to contribute to varied outcomes for women with breast cancer.

One response of the Australian nursing profession to issues of role diversity and lack of clarity in defining scope and levels of practice has been the development of competency standards (Gardner, Carryer, Dunn & Gardner, 2004), which recommend expected levels of knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviours. While the use of competency standards in nursing has been debated (McAllister, 1998), in the absence of a superior alternative, nurse regulatory authorities and professional bodies continue to benchmark safe practice in this way (Gardner et al., 2004).

In 2003, the National Breast Cancer Centre [NBCC] initiated a project to define a set of SBN Competency Standards considered integral to optimising outcomes for women with breast cancer, together with recommendations for ensuring that the educational and training requirements for SBNs in Australia are addressed adequately. SBNs work with women with breast cancer in a diversity of areas and roles, including diagnosis, treatment, rehabilitation and palliative care. As such, competency standards need to reflect the broad dimensions of SBN practice required to meet the health needs of women with breast cancer throughout their cancer journey. Moreover, as SBNs work and collaborate closely with other nurses and health professionals, it is important that competency standards reflect the interdisciplinary context of the SBN role. This interdisciplinary approach to care acknowledges that the complex and multifaceted needs of women with breast cancer are likely to be best managed through a collaborative, multidisciplinary approach

to assessment, planning, intervention and evaluation. A number of competency standards and frameworks for generalist and specialist nursing practice already exist (Australian Nursing and Midwifery Council, 2002; Australian Nursing Federation, 1997; Cancer Nurses Society of Australia, 1999, 2002; Gardner et al., 2004). The NBCC SBN Competency Standards have been designed to be inclusive of and complementary to these existing nursing competency standards and contemporary breast cancer care.

Project Design

The SBN Competency Standards were developed through a process of consultation with key stakeholders and a focused review of existing evidence in the field of breast cancer care. The development of the Standards was overseen by a multidisciplinary Steering Committee and was conducted over five main phases (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Key project phases

- **Phase 1 & 2:** Focused review of Australian and international literature and drafting of the key role areas and broad competency domains for SBNs in Australia
- **Phase 3:** Stakeholder consultation and development of draft SBN Competency Standards and educational requirements
- **Phase 4:** Synthesis of data sources and refinement of SBN Competency Standards and educational requirements
- **Phase 5:** Review of educational programs and development of recommendations for SBN education

Phases 1 & 2: Literature review and development of discussion paper

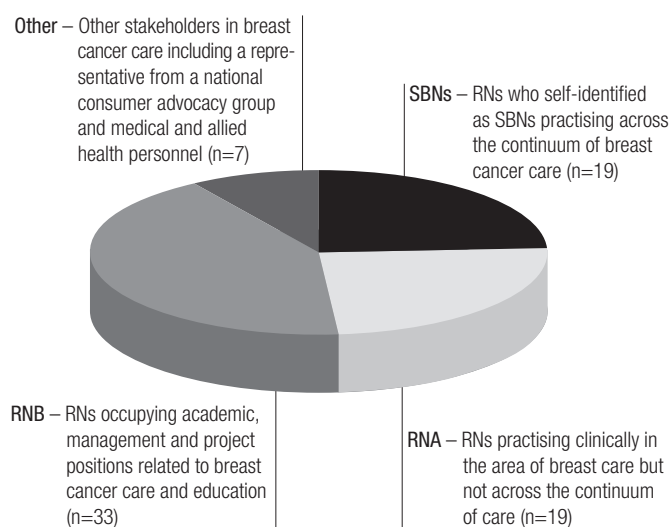
A focused review of Australian and international literature provided the foundation for the development of a draft set of core competencies. Following analysis of the literature, a discussion paper outlining the key role areas and broad competency domains that constitute the SBN role in Australia was developed.

Phase 3: Stakeholder consultation and development of draft competency and education standards

The discussion paper was circulated to 60 key stakeholders identified by NBCC. These stakeholders included registered nurses who self-identified as SBNs practising across the continuum of breast cancer care, other registered nurses practising clinically in the area of breast care, registered nurses occupying academic, management and project positions, and other key stakeholders in breast cancer care, including a representative from a national consumer advocacy organisation, and medical and allied health personnel. Respondents were asked to comment on the relevance and fit of the broad role areas and competency domains for SBN practice and the educational preparation necessary for competent SBN practice. A structured response template was provided for self-completion by respondents. Following review of responses to identify commonly recurring words, phrases and concepts, key themes were identified. A draft set of competency standards was developed to reflect these key themes. This draft was refined through two further rounds of postal consultation. The draft standards were circulated to respondents using a structured response format. The respondents were asked

to comment again on the relevance and fit of the draft competency standard statements, elements and performance criteria, and education standards and indicators in relation to current and future requirements of the SBN role. The response format also included questions for respondents to consider in preparing their responses. Where there were differences between the standards and the evidence base, respondents were asked to provide a rationale. The structured response format provided focused responses and enabled evaluation of justification/evidence cited for changes. A total of 81 responses were received over the three rounds of stakeholder consultation, representing a total of 32 stakeholder organisations (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Number of responses by category*



RN: registered nurse; SBN: Specialist Breast Nurse

* Some responses from organisations were collated responses and the exact number or category of individuals contributing to those responses was not always indicated.

Phase 4: Synthesis of data sources and refinement of competency and education standards

An Expert Working Group, comprising an SBN and researchers and academics in the field of breast cancer nursing, was convened to synthesise the data that emerged from stakeholder consultation with the published literature. In this phase, a further focused literature review was undertaken to identify additional studies providing specific evidence relevant to the domains of practice and competencies identified in previous phases. Where there were differences between the evidence base and stakeholder views, these were highlighted. These differences were discussed by members of the Expert Working Group to achieve consensus on how divergent views should be addressed in defining the competency and education standards. For example, differences were evident in the extent to which SBNs described themselves as having counselling skills, and how the professional literature describes the role of a counsellor. Following discussion, a decision was made to emphasise SBN competencies, including the ability to complete a comprehensive evidence-based assessment of psychological distress and associated risk factors, and apply advanced therapeutic communication skills, rather than

emphasise the application of specific therapeutic counselling strategies which may more appropriately be the domain of a professional counsellor. The result was a refined set of standards based on the evidence that reflects the views of major stakeholders.

Phase 5: Review of educational programs and development of recommendations for SBN education

Australian education programs for SBNs were identified by members of the Expert Working Group and through a search of Australian university websites. These programs were reviewed through website search and email follow-up to course coordinators to obtain key information about the course type and level, entry requirements, objectives, teaching and learning approaches, and assessment requirements. The information gathered through this phase was analysed by the Expert Working Group, together with data gathered from earlier stakeholder consultation, to identify recommendations relating to educational requirements for developing competent SBNs.

Definition of a Specialist Breast Nurse

A number of studies, both in Australia and overseas, have attempted to define and clarify how specialist and advanced levels of practice are conceptualised in the nursing profession (Affara & Styles, 1992; American Nurses Association, 2002; Fairweather & Gardner, 2000; National Nursing Organisations, 2004; Queensland Nursing Council, 1998; United Kingdom Central Council for Nursing and Midwifery, 2002). Based on a number of conceptual definitions of specialist practice, an SBN can be seen as requiring an advanced level of competence in those areas of practice specific to meeting the health needs of women with breast cancer, such as patient education and management of responses associated with cancer and its treatment. For the purposes of this project, it has been assumed that individuals undertaking an SBN role will already be at an advanced level of nursing practice.

This project defines the SBN as *a registered nurse who applies advanced knowledge of the health needs, preferences and circumstances of women with breast cancer to optimise the individual's health and well-being at various phases across the continuum of care, including diagnosis, treatment, rehabilitation, follow-up and palliative care.*

The project concluded that for SBNs this advanced level of knowledge and skills is reflected in five core domains of practice: Supportive care; Collaborative care; Coordinated care; Information provision and education; and Clinical leadership. The SBN Competency Standards have been developed around these five core domains. They are designed specifically for nurses whose practice incorporates an advanced level of knowledge and skill in the nursing care of women with breast cancer and assume a collaborative model of care that enables the SBN to work collaboratively with women, other nurses and members of the health team to meet the multiple health needs of women with breast cancer across the continuum of care.

Competency Standards and Domains of Practice

The SBN Competency Standards specify the performance required for nurses who practice as specialists in the field of breast cancer nursing. They are designed to be used in conjunction with the

Australian Nursing and Midwifery Council [ANMC] *National Competency Standards for the Registered Nurse and the Enrolled Nurse* (Australian Nursing and Midwifery Council, 2002) and the Australian Nursing Federation [ANF] *Competency Standards for the Advanced Practice Nurse* (Australian Nursing Federation, 1997). The SBN Competency Standards recognise that specialist practice requires advanced knowledge and skills in the field of breast cancer nursing and as such, the Competency Standards described are considered the minimum required to undertake this role.

The SBN Competency Standards have been formatted to reflect the style of the ANMC Standards (Australian Nursing and Midwifery Council, 2002), and are presented according to domains of practice; each domain includes an overarching competency statement, elements of competence, and performance criteria that illustrate aspects of competent practice.

Domain: Supportive Care

This domain comprises Competency Standards that reflect the ability of the SBN to identify multiple physical, psychological, social, sexual and spiritual needs of clients throughout the continuum of breast cancer care, and to implement evidence-based supportive care interventions in a flexible and responsive manner, in the context of a collaborative multidisciplinary approach to care, to achieve optimal health outcomes for clients with breast cancer.

Domain: Collaborative Care

This domain comprises competencies reflecting the ability of the SBN to facilitate a collaborative approach to care planning, implementation and evaluation by ensuring the client and service providers are working effectively as a team and that those involved in a client's care have established secure and dependable relationships to meet client needs. These competencies include recognition of the critical interdependence between the SBN role and other nurses and health professionals involved in a woman's care.

Domain: Coordinated Care

This domain incorporates competencies reflecting the ability of the SBN to facilitate a coordinated approach to care planning, implementation and evaluation by ensuring a comprehensive range of health and support services needed are delivered in a timely, flexible and efficient manner in response to client needs.

Domain: Information Provision and Education

This domain incorporates competencies reflecting the ability of the SBN to provide comprehensive, specialised and individualised information to clients about the pathophysiology of breast cancer and its effects, treatment approaches, and self-management strategies, using evidence-based educational strategies that are consistent with individual clinical circumstances, preferences, information and self-care needs.

Domain: Clinical Leadership

This domain contains competencies reflecting the ability of the SBN to advance and improve breast cancer care through a range of clinical leadership and professional activities.

Education and training programs for SBNs

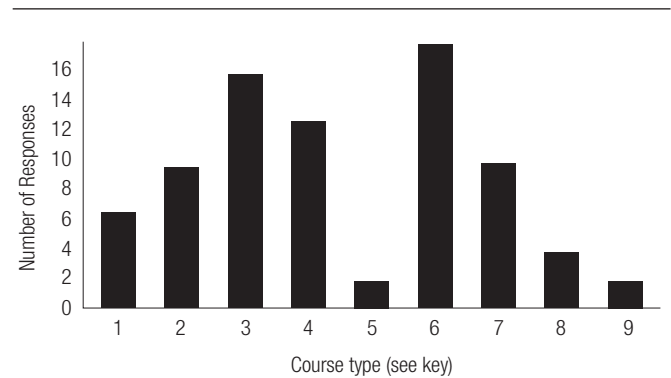
Specialist nursing education is well established in most university schools of nursing in Australia, with postgraduate qualifications now recognised in industrial agreements for nurses in a number of States (Patton, 2002). While nurse regulatory bodies in Australia are developing systems for credentialing Nurse Practitioners as advanced practitioners, there is no regulatory requirement for credentialing or accreditation for specialty practice in any field of nursing, except for specific skill areas such as midwifery or immunisation. Moreover, while selection criteria for appointment to advanced practice roles normally specifies that completion of formal postgraduate qualification is desirable, this requirement is not always essential. The SBN Competency Standards provide a framework for determining educational requirements that will facilitate the development of nurses' competence to practice in this field.

While a variety of educational programs are currently available in Australia for nurses who wish to learn about breast cancer nursing, the majority of respondents in this project agreed that SBNs require as a minimum a Graduate Diploma in order to develop the level of competence required to perform the role. This level of education was seen as necessary for achieving the depth and scope of knowledge and skills reflected in the SBN Competency Standards (Figure 3). The importance of maintaining currency of knowledge and skills was highlighted, as was the need for professional support mechanisms for SBNs. It is acknowledged that the majority support for Graduate Diploma level education as a minimum may simply reflect the current education profile of nurses working in these roles. That is, these data are consistent with the findings from the Victorian Breast Nurse Workforce study (The Victorian Centre for Nursing Practice Research, 2001), in which around 40% of the nurses surveyed reported having completed a Graduate Diploma, with only around 3% reporting having completed a Masters degree. While it could be argued that the advanced level of knowledge and skills required for a SBN to practice competently is more consistent with a Masters level qualification, the project team agreed to recommend at this stage of development of the SBN role that the Graduate Diploma level or equivalent would be the minimum required. This recommendation was made on the basis of stakeholder responses, as well as recognition of the difficulties in accessing appropriate Masters level courses at this time. However, the recommendation that a Graduate Diploma level of qualification or equivalent is a *minimum* requirement is emphasised.

The review of educational programs relating to breast cancer nursing in Australia identified that there are currently a number of pathways by which it is purported that nurses can achieve the desired level of competence for practice in this field. For example, registered nurses who have completed a Bachelors degree or equivalent qualification enabling registration as a nurse may choose to gain knowledge and skills to practice as an SBN by completing Graduate Diploma or Masters level courses. Others may choose more flexible pathways, through articulated short course or articulated programs that lead to entry or give partial credit towards Graduate Diploma or Masters level courses. While it

was beyond the scope of this project to determine the extent to which existing programs achieve the level of competence defined by the SBN Competency Standards, the evidence supports the view that as an advanced role, nurses who wish to practice as an SBN require high quality programs of sufficient depth and scope to achieve required level of competence.

Figure 3: Stakeholder views of minimum level of education requirements of SBNs



1: Graduate Diploma in cancer or oncology nursing; 2: Graduate Diploma in breast cancer nursing; 3: Graduate Diploma in cancer or oncology nursing with specific breast cancer nursing courses; 4: Graduate Diploma in oncology with continuing education in breast cancer nursing; 5: Graduate Diploma in a related topic such as psychology/women's health/counselling and continuing education in breast cancer nursing; 6: Any of the above; 7: Any of the above with the exception of choice 5; 8: Masters; 9: Alternative Graduate Diplomas such as haematology/stomal therapy.

Uptake of SBN Competency Standards and educational requirements

There is substantial evidence that SBNs make an important contribution to improved outcomes for women with breast cancer, by providing information and support and promoting continuity of care (National Breast Cancer Centre Specialist Breast Nurse Project Team, 2002). The development of the NBCC SBN Competency Standards and associated educational requirements is an important first step in addressing issues of role variation amongst nurses involved in the care of women with breast cancer. It is expected that broad implementation of the Standards will contribute to positive health outcomes for women with breast cancer by ensuring that nurses are equipped and supported appropriately to provide safe and effective nursing care.

The NBCC has made a number of recommendations regarding the uptake of the Standards (National Breast Cancer Centre, 2005). Uptake of the Standards will depend on their formal adoption and implementation at a national level by educational facilities, professional groups and health services. It will also be important that employers recognise the SBN role and are encouraged to incorporate the SBN Competency Standards in the development of role descriptions and performance evaluation and that course providers be supported to incorporate the SBN Competency Standards in curriculum design, implementation and evaluation.

Education and ongoing professional development of SBNs is essential, and it will be important that curriculum design for SBN education programs incorporates content addressing the

SBN Competency Standards, together with learning and assessment approaches that enable the development of advanced competencies at both a theoretical and practical level. Learning pathways should be sufficiently flexible to recognise prior learning while maintaining a commitment to ensuring SBN Competency Standards are achieved. Students undertaking education programs in cancer nursing and nurses practising in the role should be supported by evidence-based resources and programs incorporating the SBN Competency Standards.

The validity and credibility of the SBN Competency Standards will only be established through the application to practice by members of the profession. Evaluation of the Standards will be important to determine their validity in practice, as will the applicability of the SBN Competency Standards and associated educational requirements to generalised cancer nursing.

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