

The role of nurses in diabetes care: challenges and opportunities



With the global prevalence of diabetes set to increase over the coming decades from 537 million in 2021 to 783 million in 2045,¹ solutions must be found to ensure that both prevention and treatment are guaranteed. A key component to this response will be the strengthening of health systems. Included in the overall health system response is the important role that human resources have in attaining the non-communicable disease-related and universal health coverage-related targets in the Sustainable Development Goals. In 2020, for the International year of the Nurse and Midwife, the International Diabetes Federation called for more and better-trained nurses to address the challenges in diabetes prevention and care.² The requirement for a trained and qualified health workforce to address diabetes was stated in the 2021 World Health Assembly Resolution, entitled *Reducing the burden of noncommunicable disease through strengthening prevention and control of diabetes*.³

Other global health challenges, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, have brought to the forefront the essential role of nurses in health systems.⁴ To date, the role of nurses in diabetes management, especially in low-income and middle-income countries (LMICs), has been restricted. A variety of factors constrain the nursing role in this context, including lack of training, low prioritisation of diabetes as a health issue, diabetes being viewed as a condition that can only be managed by doctors, and an overall low perception of the types of tasks that nurses can deliver.

Expanding the role of nurses in diabetes prevention, management, and care requires not only training, but also fundamental changes at societal, policy, health system, and nursing education levels to ensure that nurses can truly fulfill their potential in tackling this global challenge. An example of such a change could be a better recognition of the important role of nurses, as was the case in Switzerland, where a referendum in 2021 highlighted the importance of the nursing profession and the role of the state in guaranteeing sufficient numbers of nurses. Although nurses play a vital role in health systems, they are often not adequately represented in governance mechanisms. Switzerland is addressing this leadership gap in the nursing profession by having a cantonal

nurse responsible for interactions with policy makers and other partners, and who is able to share the unique standpoint of a nurse. Recognition of the important role of nurses can also occur in terms of changing the types of services that nurses can offer and increasing the financial compensation they received for these services. Additionally, there is a need to understand the barriers to expansion of the role of nurses within the health system. In Kyrgyzstan, an LMIC, the only barrier from a legal or system perspective was the inability of nurses to prescribe medicines.⁵ However, an important limitation to the roles of nurses was related to the perception of nurses by doctors, the population, and the nurses themselves as being unable to provide care for non-communicable diseases, such as diabetes. More practical elements need to be addressed, with the introduction of diabetes specialist nurses, led by experiences in the UK, with nurses able to have roles in diabetes education, diabetes research, run nurse-led diabetes clinics, and prescribe medicines.⁶ In Thailand, nurses have many roles in diabetes care, acting as educators, case managers, and advanced practice nurses with a community focus beyond health facilities, providing another example of



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For more on the **non-communicable disease-related and universal health coverage-related Sustainable Development Goals** see <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/health/>

For more on the **Swiss referendum** see <https://www.fedlex.admin.ch/eli/oc/2022/240/fr>

For more on **cantonal nurses in Switzerland** see <https://www.rts.ch/info/regions/vaud/12765465-un-role-cle-dans-la-sante-pour-la-future-infirmiere-cantonale-vaudoise.html>

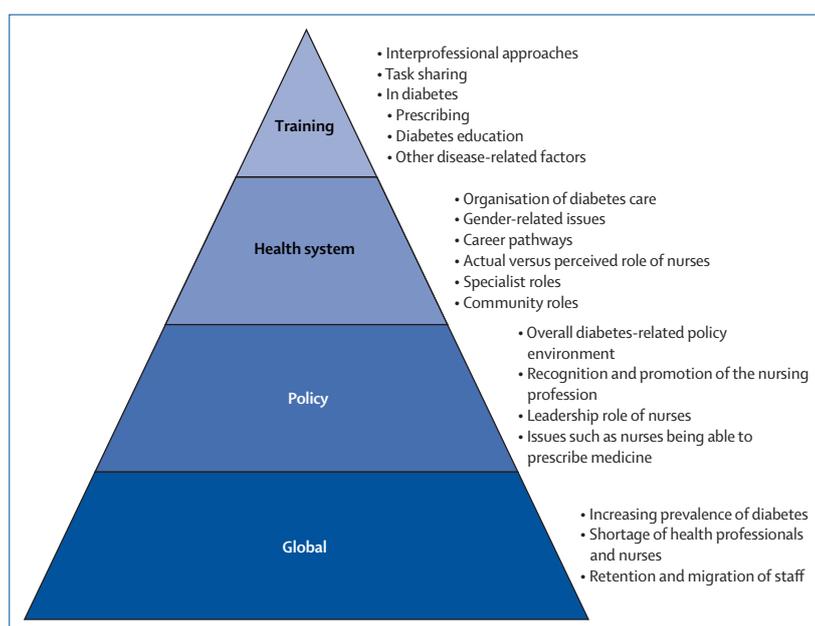


Figure: Issues that need to be addressed to ensure successful expansion of the role of nurses and their integration into diabetes care

the successful expansion of the nursing role.⁷ However, a systematic review and meta-analysis investigating the effect of task-sharing interventions for improving diabetes in LMICs found a moderate effect on diabetes management, related to decreased blood glucose measurements, of such approaches.⁸

Clearly, to reach global targets and ensure access to diabetes care, nurses must have a central role in prevention and management. Globally, the rising prevalence of type 1 and type 2 diabetes,¹ alongside the increasing shortage of health-care professionals, including nurses, is a challenge.⁴ Beyond increasing the number of nurses and improving training and leadership,⁴ we suggest that fundamental changes are needed within the overall nursing environment (figure). Nursing needs better recognition as a profession, and attractive employment opportunities with clear career paths. Global issues of retention and migration require tailored solutions to ensure that solving staff shortages in one country does not deplete nurses in other countries. Beyond societal recognition by policy makers and the population, the health system must fully recognise the important role that nurses play within the health system. This recognition must also address the unique gender-related issue of nursing, as it remains a predominantly female profession in a health-care sector that is male dominated in many countries. To provide the best possible care to the populations they serve, nurses need defined roles and responsibilities for the provision of diabetes care within the health system and the tools and skills to be able to do their jobs in different contexts. This strategy could include prescribing, training on specific disease areas, task sharing, supportive supervision, interprofessional patient education, and empowerment or use of diagnostic tools. These roles need recognition in terms of qualifications and positions, with opportunities for higher pay and career progression. One way to support such a strategy would be promotion of an interprofessional approach, which involves medical and nursing students learning together during their formative training, so they are better prepared to work together in future professional settings.⁹ The health system needs to offer different

health professionals an environment that allows them to work together for the benefit of people with diabetes.¹⁰

A quote attributed to Florence Nightingale states that, "Nursing is a progressive art such that to stand still is to go backwards." Unfortunately, the global community has been standing still with regard to expanding the role of nurses in diabetes management in many LMIC contexts. This lack of action is a missed opportunity to complement medical science with the art of nursing to improve the health and wellbeing of people with diabetes.

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