

The Role Of Nursing In Enhancing Patient Safety And Care Quality: An Evidence-Based Review

Fahad Ali Hamdan Albalawi¹, Woujoud Zaal Albalawi², Nader Saad Salem Albalawi³, Hanan Hussain Nassar Alamrani⁴, Hajer Hamza takkruni⁵, Marwah Sulaiman Aljohani⁶, Salwa Suliman Alatawi⁷, Samiyh Suliman Alatawi⁸, Nawal Abdulrahman Alqarni⁹, Maha Abdullah Albalawi¹⁰

¹.Tabuk Health Cluster, SA

².Tabuk Health Cluster. SA

³.Population Health Department, Ministry of Health branch in Tabuk, SA

⁴.Tabuk Health Cluster, SA

⁵.Makkah healthcare cluster, Maternity and Children hospital, SA

⁶.Ministry health Medinah region , SA

⁷.Al-Rajhi Health Center, Tabuk Health Cluster, SA

⁸.Tabuk Health Cluster, SA

⁹.Tabuk health cluster, SA

¹⁰. Tabuk Health Cluster, SA

Abstract

Patient safety and care quality remain central priorities for healthcare systems worldwide, with preventable adverse events continuing to pose significant clinical, ethical, and economic challenges. Nursing professionals, as the largest and most consistently present healthcare workforce, play a pivotal role in safeguarding patients and ensuring high-quality care across diverse clinical settings. This evidence-based review examines the role of nursing in enhancing patient safety and care quality by synthesizing findings from contemporary empirical studies, systematic reviews, and quality improvement reports published between 2016 and 2025. The review explores key nursing functions, including clinical surveillance, medication safety, infection prevention, effective communication, patient education, and care coordination. Evidence indicates that strong nursing practices are associated with reductions in adverse events, improved patient outcomes, enhanced patient satisfaction, and better organizational performance indicators such as reduced length of stay and improved compliance with safety standards. Additionally, the review highlights the influence of nursing education, staffing adequacy, leadership, and organizational culture on safety and quality outcomes. By integrating evidence across multiple healthcare contexts, this review underscores nursing as a critical driver of patient safety and care quality improvement. The findings support the need for sustained investment in nursing workforce development, evidence-based practice implementation, and supportive policy frameworks to strengthen healthcare system performance and patient-centered outcomes.

Keywords: Nursing role; Patient safety; Care quality; Evidence-based practice; Healthcare outcomes; Quality improvement

INTRODUCTION

Patient safety and care quality are fundamental pillars of effective healthcare delivery and remain persistent global challenges despite substantial advances in medical science and health system reforms. The World Health Organization identifies patient harm resulting from unsafe care as one of the leading causes of morbidity and mortality worldwide,

emphasizing that a significant proportion of adverse events are preventable through improved systems, workforce capacity, and evidence-based practices (World Health Organization [WHO], 2019). Within this context, nursing practice has been increasingly recognized as a critical determinant of patient safety and overall care quality across healthcare settings.

Patient safety refers to the prevention of errors and adverse effects associated with healthcare, while care quality encompasses effectiveness, safety, patient-centeredness, timeliness, efficiency, and equity. These dimensions are closely interconnected, as failures in safety often reflect broader quality gaps within healthcare systems. Nurses are uniquely positioned at the intersection of these domains due to their continuous presence at the point of care, close patient interaction, and integral role in coordinating multidisciplinary services. As frontline providers, nurses are frequently the first to detect early signs of patient deterioration, medication-related risks, and deviations from established care protocols (Aiken et al., 2018).

Over recent decades, the role of nursing has evolved beyond traditional task-oriented functions toward a more comprehensive, outcome-driven scope of practice. Contemporary nursing responsibilities increasingly include clinical decision-making, patient advocacy, safety surveillance, participation in quality improvement initiatives, and leadership in interprofessional collaboration. Evidence consistently demonstrates that higher levels of nursing education, adequate staffing ratios, and supportive practice environments are associated with lower mortality rates, fewer adverse events, and improved patient experiences (Aiken et al., 2021; Lake et al., 2019). These findings highlight nursing not merely as a supportive discipline, but as a strategic component of healthcare system performance.

In parallel, healthcare systems have placed growing emphasis on evidence-based practice as a means of reducing variability in care and enhancing patient outcomes. Nurses play a central role in translating evidence into practice through the implementation of clinical guidelines, standardized safety protocols, and continuous monitoring of care processes. Their engagement in infection prevention, medication administration, handover communication, and patient education directly influences both immediate safety outcomes and long-term quality indicators (Hall et al., 2016). Furthermore, nursing leadership and organizational culture have been shown to significantly shape safety climates and reporting behaviors within healthcare institutions (Wei et al., 2020).

Despite the growing body of research examining nursing contributions to patient safety and care quality, evidence remains dispersed across diverse clinical contexts and methodological approaches. There is a continued need for integrative reviews that synthesize current findings, clarify mechanisms of impact, and identify areas requiring further investigation. Therefore, this evidence-based review aims to synthesize contemporary literature on the role of nursing in enhancing patient safety and care quality, focusing on key functional domains, outcome measures, and system-level implications. By consolidating existing evidence, this review seeks to inform clinical practice, nursing leadership, and health policy development to support safer, higher-quality patient care.

Core Nursing Roles in Enhancing Patient Safety

Nursing professionals play a central and multifaceted role in enhancing patient safety across healthcare settings. Due to their continuous presence at the bedside and close interaction with patients, nurses are uniquely positioned to identify risks, prevent harm, and promote safe care delivery. Evidence consistently demonstrates that effective nursing practice is a cornerstone of patient safety systems, influencing both immediate clinical outcomes and long-term organizational safety performance.

One of the most critical nursing roles in patient safety is **clinical surveillance and early detection of patient deterioration**. Nurses continuously monitor vital signs, symptoms, and behavioral changes, enabling early recognition of clinical instability. Timely nursing assessment and escalation of care have been associated with reductions in failure-to-rescue events, cardiac arrests, and unplanned intensive care admissions. Studies indicate that hospitals with stronger nursing surveillance systems experience lower mortality rates and improved safety outcomes (Aiken et al., 2018; Griffiths et al., 2019). This role is particularly vital in high-acuity environments, where subtle clinical changes may precede serious adverse events.

Medication safety represents another core domain of nursing responsibility. Nurses are primarily responsible for medication preparation, administration, and monitoring of therapeutic effects and adverse reactions. Medication errors remain among the most common preventable patient safety incidents, often linked to complex regimens, workload pressures, and communication failures. Evidence suggests that adherence to the “five rights” of medication administration, use of double-check systems, and active nurse involvement in medication reconciliation significantly reduce error rates and patient harm (Keers et al., 2018). Nurses also play a critical role in educating patients about medications, further enhancing safety beyond the clinical setting.

Infection prevention and control (IPC) is a fundamental nursing role with direct implications for patient safety. Nurses are central to implementing hand hygiene practices, aseptic techniques, isolation precautions, and device-associated infection prevention bundles. Research consistently shows that strong nursing compliance with IPC protocols is associated with reduced rates of healthcare-associated infections, including catheter-associated urinary tract infections and central line-associated bloodstream infections (Mitchell et al., 2021). Nursing leadership and modeling of safe behaviors further reinforce a culture of infection prevention within healthcare teams.

Effective **communication and care handover** is another essential nursing function in safeguarding patients. Breakdowns in communication during shift changes, patient transfers, or interdisciplinary interactions are a well-documented source of adverse events. Structured handover tools, such as standardized reporting frameworks, have been shown to improve information accuracy, continuity of care, and patient safety outcomes when actively led by nurses (Starmer et al., 2017). Nurses also serve as key communicators between patients, families, and multidisciplinary teams, ensuring that critical safety-related information is shared and understood.

Patient advocacy and education constitute a further safety-enhancing nursing role. Nurses empower patients to participate actively in their care by providing education about procedures, risks, warning signs, and self-management strategies. Evidence suggests that informed and engaged patients are more likely to identify errors, adhere to treatment plans, and report concerns early, thereby reducing preventable harm (Kim et al., 2020). Through advocacy, nurses also ensure that patient preferences, vulnerabilities, and safety concerns are addressed within clinical decision-making processes.

Table 1. Core Nursing Roles and Associated Patient Safety Outcomes

Nursing Domain	Role	Safety Mechanism	Targeted Patient Safety Outcome	Supporting Evidence
	Clinical surveillance	Continuous monitoring and early escalation	Reduced failure-to-rescue and mortality	Aiken et al., 2018; Griffiths et al., 2019

Medication safety	Accurate administration and monitoring	Reduced medication errors and adverse drug events	Keers et al., 2018
Infection prevention and control	Hand hygiene, aseptic techniques, care bundles	Lower healthcare-associated infection rates	Mitchell et al., 2021
Communication and handover	Structured reporting and interdisciplinary coordination	Improved continuity of care and reduced adverse events	Starmer et al., 2017
Patient advocacy and education	Patient engagement and empowerment	Early error detection and improved adherence	Kim et al., 2020
Incident reporting and quality improvement	Risk identification and system learning	Strengthened safety culture and system performance	Wei et al., 2020

Finally, nurses play a vital role in **risk identification, incident reporting, and quality improvement**. Active nurse participation in safety reporting systems and root cause analyses contributes to organizational learning and system-level improvements. Studies indicate that supportive work environments and non-punitive reporting cultures enhance nurses' willingness to report safety incidents, leading to measurable improvements in safety performance (Wei et al., 2020). Collectively, these roles highlight nursing as an indispensable driver of patient safety, operating across individual, team, and organizational levels.

Nursing Contributions to Care Quality Improvement

Nursing practice plays a decisive role in advancing care quality by influencing how healthcare services are delivered, coordinated, and evaluated. While patient safety focuses on preventing harm, care quality extends further to encompass effectiveness, patient-centeredness, timeliness, efficiency, and equity. Nurses contribute to these dimensions through sustained patient engagement, evidence-based practice implementation, and continuous quality monitoring across clinical settings.

A central nursing contribution to care quality improvement lies in the delivery of **patient-centered care**. Nurses maintain close, ongoing contact with patients and families, allowing them to understand individual needs, preferences, and values. This relational continuity enables nurses to tailor care plans, support shared decision-making, and enhance patient satisfaction. Evidence suggests that strong nurse–patient relationships are positively associated with improved patient experiences, adherence to treatment plans, and perceived quality of care (McCormack et al., 2017; Aiken et al., 2018). Patient-centered nursing care has also been linked to improved clinical outcomes, particularly among vulnerable populations such as older adults and patients with chronic conditions.

Care coordination and interdisciplinary collaboration represent another critical mechanism through which nurses enhance care quality. Nurses frequently function as coordinators across departments, ensuring alignment between physicians, pharmacists, therapists, and support services. Effective nursing coordination reduces fragmentation of care, minimizes delays, and improves transitions between care settings. Systematic evidence indicates that nurse-led coordination models are associated with reduced hospital readmissions, improved continuity of care, and more efficient use of healthcare resources (Lake et al., 2019). These contributions are especially important in complex care environments where multiple providers and services are involved.

Nurses also play a pivotal role in **implementing evidence-based practice (EBP)** to improve care quality. By translating clinical guidelines and research findings into daily practice, nurses help standardize care processes and reduce unwarranted variation. The consistent application of evidence-based protocols—such as clinical pathways, care bundles, and standardized assessment tools—has been shown to improve treatment effectiveness and patient outcomes (Melnik et al., 2018). Moreover, nurses are often responsible for auditing compliance with quality standards and identifying gaps that require corrective action.

Communication quality is another essential domain of nursing impact on care quality. Clear, timely, and accurate communication with patients, families, and healthcare teams supports informed decision-making and continuity of care. Nurses contribute to quality improvement by ensuring accurate documentation, clarifying care plans, and facilitating effective information exchange across shifts and disciplines. Studies demonstrate that improved nursing communication is associated with fewer care delays, reduced duplication of services, and enhanced patient trust in healthcare providers (O'Daniel & Rosenstein, 2019).

Additionally, nursing practice contributes to care quality through **monitoring and evaluation of quality indicators**. Nurses routinely collect and interpret data related to patient outcomes, functional status, satisfaction, and adherence to care standards. Their involvement in quality improvement initiatives—such as Plan–Do–Study–Act cycles and clinical audits—supports continuous refinement of care processes. Research indicates that healthcare organizations with strong nursing engagement in quality initiatives report better performance on quality metrics and accreditation standards (Wei et al., 2020).

Finally, **nursing leadership and professional development** significantly influence care quality at the organizational level. Nurse leaders foster cultures of excellence by supporting ongoing education, reflective practice, and interprofessional collaboration. Higher levels of nursing education and supportive practice environments have been consistently linked to improved quality outcomes, including lower mortality rates and higher patient satisfaction (Aiken et al., 2021). These findings reinforce the strategic importance of nursing investment as a driver of sustainable care quality improvement.

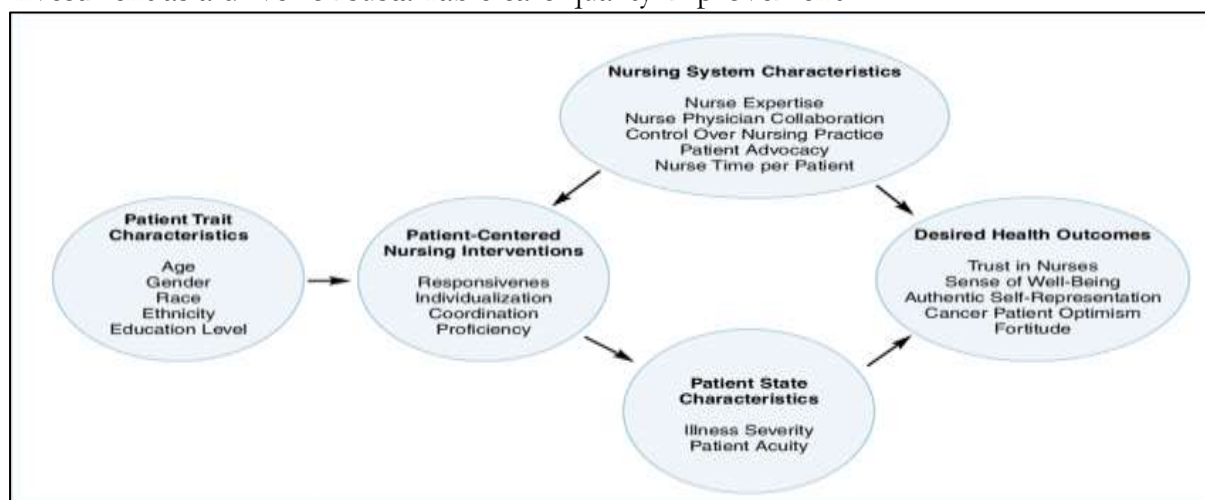


Figure 1. Conceptual Pathway of Nursing Contributions to Care Quality Improvement

This conceptual figure illustrates how core nursing functions—patient-centered care, care coordination, evidence-based practice, communication, and quality monitoring—interact to influence key care quality domains (effectiveness, patient experience, efficiency, and equity), ultimately leading to improved clinical and organizational outcomes.

Evidence Synthesis & Outcome Mapping

This section integrates and synthesizes empirical evidence on how nursing roles translate into measurable patient safety and care quality outcomes. Rather than examining individual interventions in isolation, the synthesis maps nursing contributions across clinical, patient-reported, and organizational domains, highlighting mechanisms through which nursing practice influences healthcare system performance.

Across diverse healthcare settings, evidence consistently demonstrates a strong association between nursing practice and **clinical outcomes**. Studies report that higher nurse staffing levels, advanced nursing education, and supportive practice environments are linked to reduced inpatient mortality, fewer complications, and shorter lengths of stay. Effective nursing surveillance and timely interventions reduce failure-to-rescue events and unplanned ICU admissions, particularly among high-risk patients. Systematic reviews indicate that nurse-led protocols and standardized care pathways improve treatment effectiveness and reduce variability in clinical outcomes, reinforcing the role of nursing as a stabilizing force within complex care systems.

Patient safety outcomes represent one of the most robust areas of evidence. Nursing engagement in medication safety, infection prevention, and structured communication has been shown to significantly reduce adverse events. Multiple studies confirm that hospitals with stronger nursing work environments report lower rates of medication errors, healthcare-associated infections, and patient falls. Importantly, evidence suggests that these improvements are not solely the result of individual competence, but rather the integration of nursing practice within organizational safety systems, including incident reporting mechanisms and continuous quality improvement initiatives.

Beyond clinical metrics, nursing practice strongly influences **patient-reported outcomes**, including satisfaction, trust, and perceived quality of care. Evidence indicates that patients consistently rate communication, responsiveness, and emotional support—core nursing functions—as primary determinants of their care experience. Nurse-led education and shared decision-making improve patient engagement, adherence to treatment, and self-management capabilities. These outcomes are particularly relevant in chronic disease management and transitional care, where continuity and relational care play a critical role. At the organizational level, nursing contributions extend to efficiency, compliance, and overall system performance. Studies show that effective nursing care coordination reduces readmissions, avoids unnecessary procedures, and optimizes resource utilization. Strong nursing leadership and engagement in quality improvement activities are associated with improved accreditation outcomes, higher staff retention, and more resilient safety cultures. Importantly, evidence highlights that investments in nursing staffing and professional development yield system-wide benefits that extend beyond direct patient care.

Table 2. Synthesized Evidence Linking Nursing Roles to Patient Safety and Care Quality Outcomes

Outcome Domain	Nursing Contribution	Key Outcomes Reported	Representative Evidence
Clinical outcomes	Surveillance, protocol adherence	Reduced mortality, complications, length of stay	Aiken et al., 2021; Griffiths et al., 2019
Patient safety	Medication safety, IPC, handover	Fewer adverse events and infections	Keers et al., 2018; Mitchell et al., 2021
Patient-reported outcomes	Communication, education, advocacy	Higher satisfaction and engagement	McCormack et al., 2017

Organizational outcomes	Care coordination, QI participation	Reduced readmissions, improved efficiency	Lake et al., 2019
Safety culture	Leadership, reporting engagement	Improved safety climate and learning	Wei et al., 2020

When synthesized, the evidence reveals a clear **causal pathway**: nursing inputs (education, staffing, leadership, and practice environment) enable effective nursing processes (surveillance, communication, coordination, and evidence-based practice), which in turn generate positive outcomes at patient and system levels. This integrated perspective underscores nursing as both a clinical and strategic asset in healthcare quality improvement.

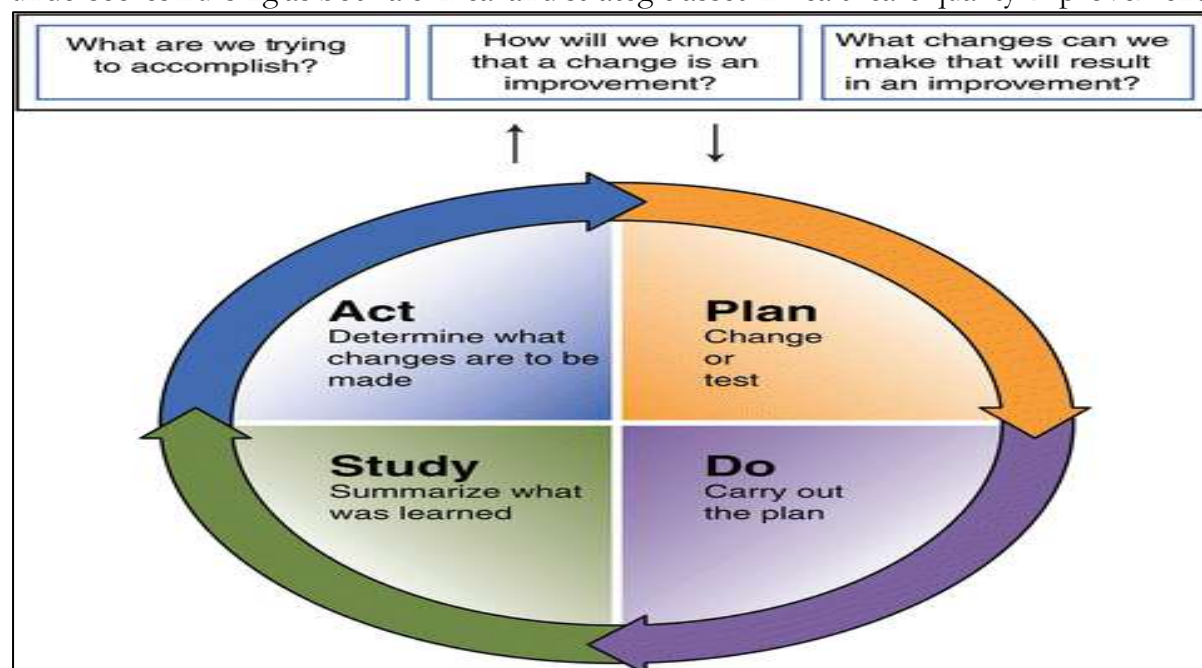


Figure 2. Integrated Outcome Mapping of Nursing Contributions to Patient Safety and Care Quality

This figure presents an integrated outcome-mapping framework illustrating how nursing inputs (education, staffing, leadership) influence core nursing processes (surveillance, communication, coordination, evidence-based practice), leading to improved patient safety, enhanced care quality, and strengthened organizational performance.

DISCUSSION

This evidence-based review highlights the central and multifaceted role of nursing in enhancing patient safety and care quality across healthcare systems. The synthesized findings demonstrate that nursing contributions extend beyond task-oriented care to encompass surveillance, coordination, communication, evidence-based practice implementation, and leadership—functions that collectively influence outcomes at patient, organizational, and system levels. The discussion interprets these findings in relation to existing evidence, theoretical frameworks, and practical implications for healthcare delivery. A key insight emerging from this review is the **consistency of evidence linking nursing practice to improved patient safety outcomes**. Across multiple settings, effective nursing surveillance and timely escalation of care were associated with reductions in failure-to-rescue events, adverse events, and preventable complications. These findings align with earlier research emphasizing the importance of continuous bedside monitoring and clinical

judgment in early deterioration detection. Importantly, the evidence suggests that safety improvements are not solely dependent on individual nurse competence, but on the integration of nursing roles within supportive organizational structures, adequate staffing levels, and positive work environments. This reinforces the view that patient safety is a system property in which nursing functions play a pivotal role.

The review also underscores nursing's substantial contribution to **care quality improvement**, particularly through patient-centered care and care coordination. Nurses' close and sustained interaction with patients positions them as primary facilitators of shared decision-making, individualized care planning, and continuity across care transitions. These relational aspects of nursing practice are increasingly recognized as critical determinants of patient satisfaction, adherence, and overall care experience. The evidence indicates that care quality cannot be fully achieved through technical interventions alone, but requires the relational and coordination capabilities that nursing uniquely provides.

Another important finding relates to the role of **evidence-based practice (EBP)** in strengthening care quality. Nurses act as key agents in translating research evidence into routine practice through standardized protocols, care pathways, and quality monitoring activities. The review demonstrates that consistent application of evidence-based nursing interventions reduces unwarranted variation in care and improves clinical effectiveness. However, variability in EBP adoption across organizations highlights persistent challenges, including limited resources, time constraints, and insufficient organizational support. These barriers underscore the need for leadership-driven strategies that empower nurses to engage meaningfully in evidence implementation.

The findings further emphasize the influence of **nursing leadership and work environments** on safety and quality outcomes. Supportive leadership, opportunities for professional development, and non-punitive safety cultures were consistently associated with improved reporting behaviors, stronger safety climates, and better organizational performance. This aligns with broader health services research indicating that workforce investment and leadership development are foundational to sustainable quality improvement. Consequently, strengthening nursing leadership capacity should be viewed as a strategic priority rather than an optional enhancement.

Despite the strength of the evidence, several **challenges and gaps** warrant discussion. First, much of the available literature originates from high-income countries, potentially limiting generalizability to low- and middle-income settings with different workforce structures and resource constraints. Second, variations in outcome definitions and measurement approaches complicate direct comparisons across studies. Third, while associations between nursing variables and outcomes are robust, fewer studies employ longitudinal or experimental designs capable of establishing causal relationships. Addressing these gaps will require more diverse, methodologically rigorous research that captures contextual influences on nursing practice and outcomes.

From a theoretical perspective, the findings support integrated models of care quality that link structure, process, and outcomes. Nursing inputs—such as education, staffing, and leadership—enable effective care processes, which in turn drive improvements in safety and quality outcomes. This integrated perspective reinforces nursing as both a clinical and organizational lever for healthcare improvement. It also highlights the limitations of isolated interventions that fail to account for broader system dynamics.

In summary, this discussion affirms nursing as a cornerstone of patient safety and care quality. The evidence suggests that healthcare systems seeking to improve outcomes must prioritize nursing practice, leadership, and work environments as strategic investments. Strengthening nursing roles through education, staffing adequacy, supportive cultures, and evidence-based practice infrastructure is essential for achieving safer, higher-quality, and

more patient-centered care. Future research should focus on context-sensitive interventions, longitudinal outcomes, and the economic value of nursing contributions to inform policy and practice at scale.

CONCLUSION

This evidence-based review highlights the essential and multifaceted role of nursing in enhancing patient safety and care quality across healthcare systems. The synthesized findings demonstrate that nursing practice is central to preventing harm, improving clinical effectiveness, and fostering patient-centered care. Through continuous clinical surveillance, medication safety, infection prevention, effective communication, care coordination, and patient advocacy, nurses contribute directly to reducing adverse events and improving patient outcomes in diverse clinical settings.

Beyond direct patient care, the review underscores the broader organizational and system-level impact of nursing. Strong nursing leadership, adequate staffing, supportive work environments, and sustained professional development were consistently associated with improved safety cultures, higher quality performance indicators, and greater healthcare system resilience. These findings reinforce the understanding that nursing contributions to safety and quality are not limited to individual competence, but are deeply embedded within organizational structures and policies that enable effective practice.

The review also emphasizes the importance of evidence-based nursing practice as a mechanism for standardizing care, reducing unwarranted variation, and translating research into meaningful improvements in patient outcomes. Nurses serve as key agents in implementing clinical guidelines, monitoring quality indicators, and driving continuous improvement initiatives. However, persistent challenges related to resource constraints, workload pressures, and variability in organizational support highlight the need for strategic investment in nursing capacity and infrastructure.

In conclusion, nursing should be recognized as a strategic pillar of patient safety and care quality improvement. Healthcare systems aiming to achieve sustainable excellence must prioritize nursing workforce development, leadership empowerment, and supportive practice environments. Strengthening nursing roles through policy, education, and organizational commitment is essential for advancing safer, higher-quality, and more patient-centered healthcare outcomes.

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