

Review Article

Global Perspectives on Nursing: Trends in Quality, Safety, Ethics, and Teaching Innovation

Ramphort Dobrina

Student, Maa Kaushaliya School of Nursing, Azamgarh, U P, India

I N F O

E-mail Id:

ramphortdobrina@gmail.com

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A B S T R A C T

Nursing continues to evolve as a dynamic and globally essential profession, increasingly influenced by quality improvement (QI) initiatives, patient safety imperatives, ethical decision-making, and innovative educational strategies. This review examines contemporary trends shaping nursing practice and education across diverse healthcare systems worldwide, highlighting both challenges and opportunities. Key themes include the implementation of structured QI frameworks such as Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) cycles, Lean, and Six Sigma; development of a culture of safety to reduce errors and enhance patient outcomes; and ethical considerations in complex clinical scenarios, including end-of-life care, patient autonomy, and culturally diverse populations.

In parallel, the review explores innovations in nursing education, such as simulation-based learning, competency-based curricula, interprofessional education, and technology-enhanced learning platforms, which foster critical thinking, clinical reasoning, and holistic patient care competencies. Evidence indicates that integrating these approaches strengthens professional competence, enhances patient satisfaction, promotes workforce sustainability, and supports the delivery of safe, ethical, and patient-centered care.

Keywords: Nursing quality, patient safety, ethical practice, nursing education innovation, global healthcare trends

Introduction

Nursing is a cornerstone of healthcare delivery, playing a critical role in influencing patient outcomes, safety, and overall quality of care across diverse healthcare systems worldwide. Nurses are not only caregivers but also advocates, educators, and leaders, bridging the gap between patients, families, and multidisciplinary teams. Their responsibilities span direct patient care, health promotion, disease prevention, and system-level interventions, making nursing essential for achieving both individual and population health goals.

Rapid changes in global health landscapes—driven by shifting disease burdens, population aging, rising

chronic illnesses, and the emergence of novel infectious diseases—have placed increasing demands on healthcare systems. Simultaneously, advancements in technology, including electronic health records, telemedicine, and artificial intelligence, have transformed clinical practice and patient expectations. In response, nursing has had to evolve, emphasizing continuous improvement in practice, policy, and education to ensure safe, effective, and patient-centered care.

Central to this evolution are four interrelated trends: quality improvement (QI), patient safety, ethical decision making, and teaching innovation. Quality improvement initiatives ensure that care processes are efficient, evidence-based,

and aligned with patient needs. Patient safety frameworks minimize risks and prevent avoidable harm. Ethical decision making guides nurses in navigating complex clinical dilemmas, including end-of-life care, resource allocation, and culturally sensitive practices. Teaching innovation equips nurses with the skills and competencies required to respond to emerging healthcare challenges, fostering lifelong learning and adaptability. Together, these pillars underpin high-performing, sustainable healthcare systems capable of meeting the demands of modern practice.¹

Global health organizations, including the World Health Organization (WHO) and the International Council of Nurses (ICN), emphasize the strategic role of nursing in achieving universal health coverage and advancing health equity. These organizations highlight that nurses are essential to closing gaps in healthcare access, reducing disparities, and promoting patient-centered care in both high- and low-resource settings. Achieving these goals requires that nurses possess a combination of knowledge, technical skills, critical thinking abilities, and ethical judgment, alongside competencies in leadership, communication, and interprofessional collaboration.^{2,3}

Furthermore, the integration of evidence-based practice, policy advocacy, and innovative educational strategies enables nurses to lead transformation within healthcare systems. By embracing emerging technologies, quality improvement frameworks, and patient safety initiatives, nurses can anticipate and respond to changing healthcare demands while ensuring equitable, high-quality care. This dynamic and multifaceted role underscores nursing as not only a profession but a critical driver of healthcare system performance and societal well-being.

Quality Improvement in Nursing

Definition and Frameworks

Quality improvement (QI) in nursing refers to systematic, data-driven approaches aimed at enhancing healthcare processes, patient outcomes, and overall service delivery. QI emphasizes continuous evaluation and refinement of care practices through evidence-based interventions.

Several frameworks have been adapted from industry to healthcare to guide QI initiatives:

- **Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) Cycles:** This iterative model allows teams to plan interventions, implement changes, study the outcomes, and adjust strategies for improvement. It is widely used to test small-scale changes before system-wide implementation.
- **Lean Methodology:** Focused on eliminating waste and improving workflow efficiency, Lean techniques streamline nursing processes, reduce delays, and enhance patient satisfaction.
- **Six Sigma:** Utilizing statistical analysis to reduce variability and errors, Six Sigma helps healthcare teams standardize processes and achieve consistent outcomes.

These frameworks provide a structured approach for nurses and interdisciplinary teams to identify problems, implement solutions, and monitor results systematically.^{4,5}

Global Implementation Strategies

QI initiatives are implemented at various levels—unit, organizational, and national—using strategies tailored to specific contexts:

- **Clinical Audits:** Regular audits assess adherence to clinical guidelines and standards, allowing benchmarking across units and regions. These audits identify gaps in practice, highlight areas for improvement, and facilitate accountability.⁶
- **Standardized Care Pathways:** By outlining evidence-based steps for managing specific conditions, care pathways reduce variability, improve efficiency, and enhance patient safety. Standardized pathways have been particularly effective in areas such as chronic disease management, post-surgical care, and infection prevention.⁷
- **Patient Feedback Systems:** Collecting patient perspectives through surveys, interviews, and digital platforms informs QI projects. Incorporating patient input ensures that care redesign aligns with patient needs and improves satisfaction and engagement.⁸
- **Interdisciplinary Collaboration:** Effective QI requires cooperation among nurses, physicians, pharmacists, and allied health professionals. Collaborative models encourage shared responsibility for outcomes and facilitate integration of best practices.
- **Technology-Driven QI:** Electronic health records, clinical dashboards, and predictive analytics enhance data collection, monitoring, and decision-making, enabling timely interventions and continuous improvement.

Outcomes and Evidence

The impact of QI initiatives on patient care has been documented internationally:

- **Clinical Outcomes:** Structured QI programs have been linked to reductions in hospital-acquired infections, medication errors, and readmission rates. Standardized care and adherence to protocols contribute directly to safer patient care.^{9,10}
- **Patient Experience:** National QI frameworks, such as those in the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia, have improved patient satisfaction through streamlined processes, shorter waiting times, and more coordinated care.¹¹

- **Workforce Outcomes:** QI initiatives support nurses by clarifying protocols, reducing inefficiencies, and enhancing professional development. Engaged nursing staff are more likely to adopt best practices and contribute to continuous improvement efforts.
- **Global Health Implications:** Countries with structured QI frameworks demonstrate that system-wide implementation of evidence-based strategies is feasible and sustainable. Lessons learned from high-income countries can inform adaptations in LMICs, where resource constraints necessitate cost-effective, high-impact interventions.

Implications for Nursing Practice

Nurses are central to the success of QI initiatives. Their continuous presence at the bedside, knowledge of patient needs, and clinical expertise allow them to identify inefficiencies, implement interventions, and monitor outcomes. Key nursing roles in QI include:

- Leading and participating in audit and evaluation activities.
- Educating patients and colleagues on best practices and care standards.
- Advocating for process improvements and patient-centered innovations.
- Utilizing data to inform clinical decision-making and policy development.

Patient Safety as a Priority

Safety Culture and Reporting Systems

Patient safety is a foundational aspect of high-quality healthcare. Safety culture refers to the shared values, beliefs, and norms within an organization that prioritize safety and minimize harm to patients. A positive safety culture encourages staff to report errors, near misses, and adverse events without fear of blame or retribution. This open reporting environment promotes organizational learning, continuous improvement, and proactive risk management.

Key components of an effective safety culture include:

- Leadership commitment to safety, ensuring that patient protection is a core organizational priority.
- Transparent communication channels that encourage reporting and discussion of safety issues.
- Staff engagement and empowerment to identify risks and participate in solutions.¹²

Safety Interventions

Evidence-based safety interventions have demonstrated measurable improvements in patient outcomes. Notable interventions include:

- **Medication Reconciliation:** Standardized processes for verifying patient medications at admission, transfer, and discharge reduce prescribing and administration errors.
- **Surgical Checklists:** The implementation of checklists, such as those recommended by WHO's Safe Surgery Saves Lives campaign, has been associated with significant reductions in surgical complications and mortality.
- **Fall Prevention Programs:** Multicomponent programs, including patient assessment, environmental modifications, and staff education, reduce fall-related injuries in both acute and long-term care settings.
- **Infection Control Protocols:** Adherence to hand hygiene, sterilization procedures, and isolation precautions decreases hospital-acquired infections, enhancing patient safety.¹³

Global Comparisons and Challenges

Patient safety priorities and challenges differ across healthcare systems, particularly between high-income countries (HICs) and low- and middle-income countries (LMICs).

- **High-Income Countries (HICs):** Well-resourced systems often have structured reporting mechanisms, advanced health IT systems, and robust regulatory oversight. These features facilitate continuous monitoring, risk mitigation, and adherence to safety standards.
- **Low- and Middle-Income Countries (LMICs):** Resource constraints, limited workforce capacity, and inadequate infrastructure create barriers to implementing safety interventions. Despite these challenges, targeted initiatives—such as WHO surgical safety programs and infection prevention campaigns—have successfully improved outcomes even in resource-limited settings.^{14,15}

Global comparisons highlight the importance of adapting safety strategies to local contexts. Successful interventions often combine low-cost, high-impact measures (e.g., checklists and hand hygiene protocols) with staff training and leadership support to sustain improvements.

Integration with Quality Improvement

Patient safety and quality improvement (QI) are inherently linked. QI initiatives often identify safety risks, implement interventions, and monitor outcomes. For instance, reducing medication errors or preventing hospital-acquired infections requires a systematic approach that combines process evaluation, staff training, and patient engagement. By embedding safety into QI frameworks, healthcare organizations can achieve more consistent, reliable, and equitable patient outcomes across clinical settings.

Implications for Nursing Practice

Nurses play a pivotal role in ensuring patient safety, given their continuous presence at the bedside and their involvement in direct care processes. Key responsibilities include:

- Adhering to safety protocols and guidelines.
- Participating in incident reporting and risk assessment activities.
- Educating patients and families about safety measures.
- Advocating for systemic changes to reduce errors and improve care quality.

Strengthening patient safety requires a coordinated, global effort that integrates education, leadership, and policy initiatives. Equipping nurses with the skills, knowledge, and resources to prevent harm is essential for achieving high-quality, equitable healthcare delivery worldwide.

Ethical Decision Making in Nursing

Core Ethical Principles

Ethical decision making is fundamental to nursing practice, guiding the delivery of care that respects the dignity, rights, and well-being of patients. Nurses rely on four central ethical principles:

- **Autonomy:** Respecting patients' rights to make informed decisions regarding their care, including the right to refuse interventions.
- **Beneficence:** Acting in the patient's best interest to promote health and well-being.
- **Nonmaleficence:** Avoiding harm in the provision of care, including the prevention of medical errors and unnecessary interventions.
- **Justice:** Ensuring equitable allocation of healthcare resources and fairness in treatment delivery.

These principles often intersect, and conflicts may arise—for example, when patient autonomy conflicts with clinical judgment or when resource limitations affect equitable care. Nurses must use structured ethical reasoning to navigate these challenges, ensuring care decisions are morally sound, patient-centered, and aligned with professional standards.¹⁶

Global Ethical Challenges

Nurses worldwide encounter ethical dilemmas influenced by cultural, legal, and resource contexts:

- **End-of-Life Care:** Decisions around life-sustaining treatments, palliative care, and advance directives vary across cultures and legal frameworks. Nurses must respect patients' wishes while adhering to institutional policies and legal requirements, which can create complex ethical scenarios.¹⁷
- **Resource Scarcity:** Especially in LMICs, limited staffing, equipment, and medication availability require nurses

to prioritize care ethically, balancing individual patient needs against population-level outcomes.¹⁸

- **Cultural Competence:** Nurses provide care within diverse cultural contexts. Ethical challenges may arise when patient values or cultural practices conflict with evidence-based guidelines, requiring sensitivity, negotiation, and advocacy.¹⁹
- **Technological and Policy Implications:** The rise of digital health, telemedicine, and AI introduces new ethical considerations regarding patient privacy, consent, and equitable access. Nurses must remain informed and proactive in addressing these challenges.²¹

Education, Support, and Ethical Competence

To navigate ethical complexities, nurses need a combination of formal education, reflective practice, and institutional support:

- **Formal Ethics Education:** Nursing curricula increasingly include ethical theory, legal frameworks, and case-based learning to prepare students for real-world dilemmas. Simulation-based exercises allow students to practice decision-making in controlled, safe environments.
- **Reflective Practice:** Regular reflection helps nurses evaluate their decisions, identify biases, and strengthen moral reasoning, supporting professional growth.
- **Clinical Supervision and Mentorship:** Guidance from experienced mentors and supervisors fosters ethical confidence, accountability, and adherence to professional standards.
- **Institutional Ethics Support:** Hospitals and healthcare organizations provide ethics committees, clinical guidelines, and decision-making frameworks to assist nurses in navigating ethical challenges systematically.²⁰

Implications for Global Nursing Practice

Ethical decision making strengthens patient trust, care quality, and health equity. Globally, integrating ethics education, culturally sensitive policies, and professional support improves patient outcomes and ensures healthcare systems operate safely and fairly. Combining ethical practice with quality improvement, patient safety initiatives, and interprofessional collaboration equips nurses to respond effectively to evolving clinical and societal demands.²²

Innovations in Nursing Education

Simulation and Skills Labs

Simulation has become a cornerstone of modern nursing education, offering a safe, controlled environment where students can practice clinical scenarios without risk to patients. High-fidelity manikins, task trainers, and virtual simulations allow learners to develop critical psychomotor skills, clinical reasoning, and decision-making abilities.

Research demonstrates that repeated exposure to simulated scenarios improves student confidence, reduces anxiety in real clinical settings, and enhances the ability to respond to emergencies effectively.^{21,22} Simulation also provides opportunities for interprofessional collaboration and reflection on ethical dilemmas, further preparing nurses for complex clinical environments.

Competency-Based Education

Competency-based education (CBE) frameworks ensure that nursing students achieve measurable outcomes aligned with professional standards and societal needs. CBE emphasizes mastery of knowledge, skills, and attitudes rather than time-based progression. By focusing on critical thinking, clinical judgment, and evidence-based practice, CBE prepares graduates to meet evolving healthcare demands. Competency assessments may include objective structured clinical examinations (OSCEs), portfolio reviews, and reflective practice, ensuring accountability and readiness for practice.²³

Technology-Enhanced Learning

Technological advancements have revolutionized nursing education. E-learning platforms, mobile applications, virtual reality (VR), and artificial intelligence (AI) provide personalized, adaptive learning experiences that cater to diverse learner needs. VR simulations allow immersive clinical practice in environments that replicate complex scenarios such as intensive care units or disaster response. AI-driven platforms support adaptive assessments, tracking student progress and providing targeted feedback. Technology-enhanced learning also facilitates scalability, making high-quality education accessible to nursing students in remote or resource-limited settings.^{24,25}

Interprofessional Education (IPE)

Interprofessional education (IPE) promotes collaboration among nursing, medical, pharmacy, and allied health students. IPE fosters communication, teamwork, and shared decision-making—skills essential for holistic, patient-centered care. By engaging in joint simulation exercises, case discussions, and collaborative projects, learners develop mutual respect, role clarity, and an understanding of interprofessional dynamics, which improves patient safety and care quality in practice settings.²⁶

Integration of Trends: Synergies and Outcomes

Linking Quality, Safety, and Education

Educational innovations that integrate quality improvement (QI) and patient safety principles into curricula prepare nurses to contribute meaningfully to system-level initiatives. For example, simulation exercises combined with QI projects allow students to practice evidence-based interventions while monitoring outcomes, bridging theory and practice.

Embedding safety checklists, audit exercises, and error reporting scenarios within education enhances students' ability to identify risks, prevent harm, and participate in continuous improvement initiatives from the start of their careers.²⁷

Ethical Practice and Clinical Outcomes

Ethically competent nurses strengthen patient trust, satisfaction, and adherence to treatment plans. Education that emphasizes ethical reasoning, reflective practice, and culturally sensitive decision-making reduces moral distress among practitioners and enhances the overall quality of care. When ethical principles are consistently applied, patient-centered care improves, and healthcare teams experience better collaboration and morale, contributing to safer and more effective outcomes.²⁸

Global Workforce Development

Global nursing workforce trends highlight the need for mobility, lifelong learning, and leadership development. International partnerships, exchange programs, and standardized competency frameworks support workforce sustainability by ensuring that nurses across countries meet comparable professional standards. Emphasis on continuous professional development and advanced practice roles enables nurses to respond to emerging healthcare challenges, participate in policy and system-level improvements, and lead innovation in clinical and educational settings. These strategies promote resilience and adaptability in the global nursing workforce, ensuring high-quality care delivery worldwide.²⁹

Implications for Practice

Integrating education, QI, safety, and ethical practice strengthens healthcare systems. Nurses trained in innovative, competency-based, and technology-enhanced programs are better prepared to navigate complex care environments, reduce errors, and lead improvement initiatives. By fostering ethical reasoning, interprofessional collaboration, and evidence-based practice, these educational approaches contribute to a culture of excellence, resilience, and sustainability in both local and global healthcare systems.

Challenges and Barriers

Despite advances in quality improvement, patient safety, ethical practice, and innovative education, nursing faces persistent challenges and barriers that affect implementation and sustainability:

- **Resource Disparities:** Low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) often struggle with limited infrastructure, inadequate clinical technology, and insufficient access to simulation labs or digital learning platforms. These resource gaps hinder the adoption

of advanced QI initiatives, competency-based training, and safety protocols, limiting opportunities for nurses to practice in high-fidelity or real-world scenarios.³⁰

- **Curriculum Constraints:** Nursing curricula are increasingly overloaded, balancing foundational knowledge, clinical skills, ethics, leadership, and QI training. Integrating all essential competencies without overwhelming students remains a challenge, especially when faculty numbers or teaching hours are limited. Curricular inflexibility can result in uneven preparation for complex clinical and ethical environments.³¹
- **Resistance to Change:** Traditional academic models and hierarchical organizational cultures may resist pedagogical innovations. Faculty unfamiliar with simulation, technology-enhanced learning, or interprofessional education may be hesitant to adopt new methods. Resistance can slow the translation of evidence-based educational strategies into routine teaching practice.³²
- **Workforce Shortages and Burnout:** High turnover, staff shortages, and clinician burnout reduce capacity for sustained QI and safety initiatives. Overworked nurses may struggle to engage in continuous professional development, participate in audits, or implement evidence-based interventions consistently. Burnout also negatively affects ethical decision making, patient communication, and overall quality of care.³³
- **Global Disparities in Leadership and Policy Support:** In many settings, nurses lack the authority or support to influence system-level policies, which can limit their ability to lead QI projects or implement educational innovations effectively. Without structural empowerment, the impact of nursing interventions may be restricted to isolated units rather than system-wide improvement.

Addressing these barriers requires coordinated strategies at multiple levels, including investments in infrastructure, faculty development, leadership empowerment, and policies that prioritize nursing education, workforce sustainability, and equitable access to resources.

Future Directions

To ensure sustainable progress in nursing practice, education, and global health outcomes, research, policy, and practice priorities must focus on several key areas:

- **Standardizing Global Competency Frameworks:** Developing and implementing internationally recognized competency frameworks for nursing quality, safety, ethics, and education will ensure consistency in professional standards across diverse healthcare systems. Standardization facilitates mobility, professional development, and the ability to respond to global health challenges.³⁴

- **Expanding Digital and Hybrid Learning Models:** Investment in online platforms, virtual simulations, mobile learning, and AI-driven adaptive learning systems can extend access to high-quality education in underserved regions. Hybrid models that combine online learning with local clinical experiences provide flexible, scalable solutions that address resource limitations.³⁵
- **Strengthening Global Nursing Leadership:** Building leadership capacity is critical for nurses to influence health policy, system design, and workforce planning. Leadership development programs, mentorship, and participation in international health initiatives empower nurses to advocate for patient safety, equitable resource allocation, and system-wide improvement.³⁶
- **Longitudinal Research on Interventions:** Rigorous, longitudinal studies evaluating the outcomes of educational innovations, QI projects, and safety initiatives are needed. Evidence of long-term impact on patient outcomes, workforce retention, and healthcare system performance will guide best practices and inform policy decisions.³⁷
- **Promoting Interprofessional and Cross-Border Collaboration:** Future directions should include fostering global networks for collaboration, knowledge sharing, and joint QI projects. Cross-border initiatives enhance the adaptability of best practices, address shared healthcare challenges, and support equitable care delivery.
- **Focusing on Resilience and Well-Being:** Strategies to mitigate burnout and promote workforce resilience will be critical for sustaining nursing contributions to quality, safety, and ethical practice. Integrating wellness programs, flexible work arrangements, and professional support networks ensures that nurses can maintain engagement in continuous improvement efforts.

Conclusion

Nursing practice worldwide is evolving rapidly, driven by the intertwined imperatives of quality improvement, patient safety, ethical practice, and educational innovation. These trends are mutually reinforcing: quality improvement initiatives enhance patient outcomes and system efficiency, while patient safety frameworks reduce preventable harm and foster a culture of accountability. Ethical decision making guides nurses in navigating complex clinical dilemmas and resource constraints, ensuring care is patient-centered, culturally sensitive, and morally sound. Educational innovations—including simulation, competency-based learning, technology-enhanced platforms, and interprofessional education—equip nurses with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to thrive in dynamic healthcare environments.

Despite these advancements, significant challenges persist, particularly in low- and middle-income countries. Resource limitations, workforce shortages, curricular constraints, and resistance to change can impede the consistent implementation of best practices in nursing education and clinical care. These barriers highlight the need for context-specific strategies that are adaptable, scalable, and sensitive to local healthcare realities.

Global collaboration, policy support, and investment in both nursing education and system-level improvements are critical to overcoming these challenges. Standardized competency frameworks, expanded digital learning opportunities, leadership development programs, and robust longitudinal research on outcomes are all essential components of a sustainable and effective nursing workforce. By prioritizing these strategies, healthcare systems can ensure that nurses are not only prepared to meet current demands but are also equipped to lead future innovations in care delivery.

Ultimately, advancing nursing practice globally requires a holistic approach that integrates quality, safety, ethics, and education. When nurses are empowered through training, supported by policy, and provided with the necessary resources, they can drive meaningful improvements in patient care, contribute to resilient and equitable healthcare systems, and advance global health goals. Through sustained investment and collaborative effort, the nursing profession can continue to transform healthcare delivery and serve as a cornerstone of safe, high-quality, and ethically grounded care for populations worldwide.

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