A Comprehensive Look at Nurse Practitioners and Their Role in Health Care Delivery

The intersection between modern health care issues and contemporary nursing practice

SUMMARY

Julie Fairman, PhD, FAAN, RN, a nurse historian at the University of Pennsylvania School of Nursing, had conducted research on the history of 20th century health care issues pervading contemporary nursing practice with a focus on the history of the social construction of professional boundaries.

In 2007, Fairman received an Investigator Award in Health Policy Research from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) to build on this previous work and conduct an examination of nurse practitioners and their role in health care delivery since 1975. A national program, the RWJF Investigator Awards in Health Policy Research supports broad studies of the most challenging health, health care, and health policy issues facing America. (Read the Program Results Report for additional information.)

Key Results

Fairman authored or co-authored the following based on her research:

- “Broadening the Scope of Nursing Practice,” an article published in the New England Journal of Medicine, develops a rationale for expanding the role of nurse practitioners.

- “Reimagining Nursing’s Place in the History of Clinical Practice,” an article published in the Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences, “posits how medical history might be conceptualized if nurses and nursing history were used as the analytical lens.”

- “The Right to Write: Nurse Practitioners and Prescription,” a chapter in Prescribed: Writing, Filling, Using, and Abusing the Prescription in Modern America, contends that the battles over allowing nurse practitioners to prescribe “illustrate the arbitrary and contested boundaries of clinical practice set by both states and professional organizations.”
Funding

RWJF supported Fairman’s work from June 2007 through May 2012 with a grant of $283,250.

CONTEXT

Fairman is the Nightingale professor of nursing and director of the Barbara Bates Center for the Study of the History of Nursing at Penn’s School of Nursing. Her research examines the intersection between modern health care issues and contemporary nursing practice.

“Almost everything that I do is connected to this singular strand—the idea that history informs health policy,” she said in an interview for this report. “It helps us understand what has happened, know what currently exists, and think about the future. So historical data is a really important part of how we make policy.”

She uses the nurse practitioner movement to provide a historical overview and critique of American nursing, exploring the public and private forces driving the specialization of nursing in the United States.

“Persistent issues such as the nurse shortage, the shape of nursing education, and the care of chronically ill and indigent populations are rooted in the history of health care and nursing. A highly creative meshing of history and policy may provide the innovative strategies necessary to facilitate a transition to a health care system that is both efficient and fair.”—Julie Fairman

THE PROJECT

For this project, funded under the RWJF Investigator Awards in Health Policy Research, Fairman examined the history of the nurse practitioner movement since 1975, including the role of nurse practitioners in health care delivery and:

- Their aspirations for professional growth and autonomy
- Their education and certification
- State regulation
- Reimbursement for their services
- Federal and philanthropic funding for nursing education
The influence of professional associations

RWJF granted Fairman a year’s leave from the project in 2009–2010 so that she could serve as Nurse Scholar in Residence at the Institute of Medicine (IOM). While there, she worked with the Committee on the Future of Nursing, conducting research and helping to write a section of its 2010 report *The Future of Nursing: Leading Change, Advancing Health*. (The project director for the committee was Susan B. Hassmiller, PhD, RN, FAAN, RWJF’s senior adviser for nursing.)

Fairman also participated in the focused orientation of the *RWJF Health Policy Fellows* program while at the IOM.¹

**RESULTS**

During the course of her *Investigator Award*, Fairman produced:

- Seven journal articles, six of which she was the sole or lead author
- A book, *Nurse Practitioners: Evolution and Future of Advanced Practice*, which she co-edited. She also wrote or co-wrote two chapters and the book’s conclusion
- Four other book chapters, three of which she was the sole author
- Eleven presentations at venues such as the IOM and the International Conference on Nursing History (two are posted on YouTube)

See the *Bibliography* for publication details and links to the YouTube presentations.

**The Key Products**

In an interview, Fairman identified three key products of the grant:

- “Broadening the Scope of Nursing Practice,” (*New England Journal of Medicine*), which develops a rationale for expanding the role of nurse practitioners

   After examining the critical factors limiting nurses’ ability to practice to the full extent of their education, training, and competence (e.g., state-based regulatory barriers and political opposition from medical organizations), and reviewing reasons to relax these regulations (e.g., cost savings, responding to the growing demand for primary care, and fully utilizing federal and state investments in nursing education), Fairman concludes:

   “This is a critical time to support an expanded, standardized scope of practice for nurses. Economic forces, demographics,”

¹ RWJF began funding the *Health Policy Fellows* program in 1973. For more information, visit its [website](#) or read the [Program Results Report](#).
the gap between supply and demand, and the promised expansion of care necessitate changes in primary care delivery. ... Fighting the expansion of nurse practitioners’ scope of practice is no longer a defensible strategy.”

- “Reimagining Nursing’s Place in the History of Clinical Practice,” (Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences), which “posits how medical history might be conceptualized if nurses and nursing history were used as the analytical lens.”

“Nurses’ (our) eyes see different things; our experiences shape different points of view; and our interests construct different questions,” she writes in the article.

The American Association for the History of Nursing honored this article with its Adelaide Nutting Award for Exemplary Historical Research Writing.

- In “The Right to Write: Nurse Practitioners and Prescription,” a chapter in Prescribed: Writing, Filling, Using, and Abusing the Prescription in Modern America, Fairman contends that the battles over allowing nurse to prescribe “illustrate the arbitrary and contested boundaries of clinical practice set by both states and professional organizations.”

The fight “entailed challenges to entrenched medical practice boundaries that were set in physicians’ hearts and minds long before the questions of who could and should have prescription authority arose,” she writes.

Honors

In addition to the Adelaide Nutting Award noted above, Fairman received the following honors during the grant period:

- The Claire M. Fagin Distinguished Researcher Award, University of Pennsylvania School of Nursing

- Election to the Sigma Theta Tau International Research Hall of Fame

LESSONS LEARNED

1. Be prepared to pursue scholarly topics into areas unanticipated in the original project design. Fairman notes that as her research began to move into issues relating to current health policy, she realized that she needed a firmer foundation in how policy is made and implemented. In this regard, the timing of her appointment as
Nurse Scholar in Residence at the IOM, as well as her participation in the focused policy orientation of the RWJF Health Policy Fellows program, was fortuitous.

AFTERWARD

Fairman continues to work on a book that will be a compilation of her work under the grant.

She serves as researcher manager for the Center for Championing Nursing, part of an RWJF/AARP program, *Future of Nursing: Campaign for Action*, which is implementing recommendations of the Institute of Medicine’s *Future of Nursing* report.

She is also co-director with RWJF’s Susan Hassmiller, RN, PhD, of an RWJF national program, *The Future of Nursing Scholars*, running from May 2012 to May 2017, which aims to help more nurses obtain PhD degrees. The University of Pennsylvania School of Nursing manages the program.
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