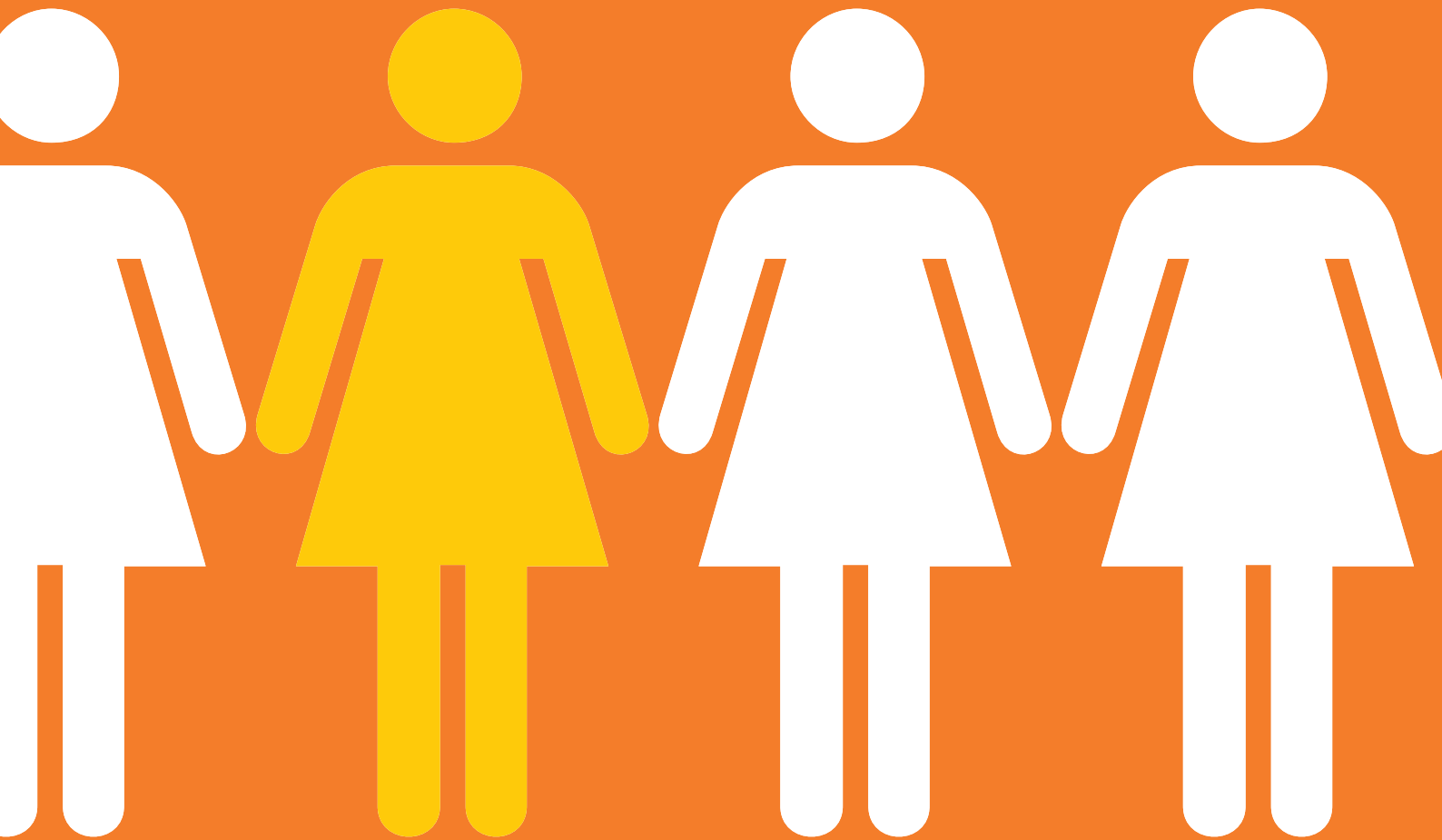


Clinical Nurse Specialists in Early Pregnancy Care

STANDARDS CONSENSUS STATEMENT



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Contents

Background.....	4
Introduction.....	4
Staffing for safe and effective care	5
Ultrasound scanning	6
Non-medical prescribing	7
Consent and delegated consent	8
Manual vacuum aspiration	9
Counselling and bereavement care.....	10
Political awareness	11
Conclusions.....	12
References and further reading.....	13
Appendix	15

Notes to readers

- The RCN recognises that services are provided by registered nurses and midwives, health care support workers/maternity care support workers, assistant practitioners, nursing associates, nursing and midwifery students, and trainee nursing associates. For ease of reading, the generic terms ‘nurse’, ‘nursing’ and ‘nurses’ are often used throughout this document.
- As a gender diverse society this guidance can be used by and/or applied to people who identify as non-binary, transgender or gender fluid. Equally not all those who become pregnant will identify as women, and where relevant this has been acknowledged.

Background

In 2017, the RCN published *Clinical Nurse Standards in Early Pregnancy Care*, available at: rcn.org.uk/professional-development/publications/clinical-nurse-specialist-in-early-pregnancy-care-uk-pub-009-931, which were produced collaboratively with the Association of Early Pregnancy Units (AEPU). The purpose of the standards was to outline agreed criteria for developing and maintaining the role of clinical nurse specialists within the early pregnancy care sector and enhance service provision across the UK.

In 2021, the RCN Women's Health Forum carried out an impact assessment of the standards effectiveness and found a varying picture of success. The report can be found at: rcn.org.uk/professional-development/publications/clinical-nurse-specialist-standards-in-early-pregnancy-care-impact-assessment-report-uk-pub-009-932. It demonstrated a lack of consistency in how the standards were being applied across the UK. To address the recommendations from that report, the project team discussed the issues with key stakeholders in 2022, which has led to the development of this statement to clarify the RCN's way forward in addressing the recommendations (which can be found in the Appendix on [page 15](#)).

Introduction

Once the impact assessment had been completed, it was encouraging to see positive feedback around the usage of the *Clinical Nurse Specialist in Early Pregnancy Care Standards*, whilst acknowledging there was further work to do. The project team then considered the recommendations, to ensure the standards were contemporary and fit for purpose, using the themes detailed below.

- Staffing for safe and effective care.
- Ultrasound scanning.
- Non-medical prescribing.
- Consent and delegated consent.
- Manual vacuum aspiration.
- Counselling and bereavement care.
- Political awareness.

These were considered with key stakeholders to agree steps to support implementation of the updated standards. This will require commitment and support from early pregnancy care units, and their trust/hospital board, to ensure all staff are competent and confident to carry out these roles and have opportunities to progress their skills, knowledge and career pathways.

Staffing for safe and effective care

Staffing for safe and effective care applies to all health and social care settings and includes early pregnancy care units. Clarity around roles and responsibilities must form part to the overall strategy for running effective and safe health care provision. The RCN's *Nursing Workforce Standards* (RCN, 2021a) are designed to support a safe and effective nursing workforce and can be used to strengthen the provision of care in a safer environment, where nurses can practice to their full potential.

In early pregnancy care units, it is important to make distinctions between roles on a rota, to avoid double counting, for example, someone performing ultrasound scanning would not also be carrying out manual vacuum aspiration at the same time as undertaking triage. These enhanced roles should also be clearly linked to competency frameworks and job plans. Acceptable staffing levels should not be based wholly on numbers and requires good workforce planning to ensure different skills and different skill mix, (which may change throughout the day/week/year), to support high quality care for those using the services of the unit. Within this, there needs to be an explicit understanding of the diversity of roles required to provide a complete service.

The RCN supports the use of its *Nursing Workforce Standards* to enhance safer and effective staffing levels in early pregnancy care units. The standards are set out in three distinct themes, which can be used to constantly assess, agree and support safe and effective staffing levels.

- **Responsibility and accountability:** these four standards outline where the responsibility and accountability lie within an organisation for setting, reviewing and taking decisions and action regarding the nursing workforce.
- **Clinical leadership and safety:** these six standards outline the need for registered nurses with lead clinical professional responsibility for teams, their role in nursing workforce planning and the professional development of that workforce.
- **Health, safety and wellbeing:** these four standards outline the health, safety, dignity, equality and respect values of the nursing workforce to enable them to provide the highest quality of care.

The standards are available at: [rcn.org.uk/Professional-Development/publications/rcn-workforce-standards-uk-pub-009681](https://www.rcn.org.uk/Professional-Development/publications/rcn-workforce-standards-uk-pub-009681)

There is also a need to consider how accurate workforce data will assist with this process.

Ultrasound scanning

The use of ultrasound in early pregnancy care is crucial, as most women (and those who do not identify as women, who are pregnant) presenting with an issue in pregnancy will benefit from an ultrasound scan. NICE guidance on ectopic pregnancy and miscarriage (NICE, 2021) recommends that all units should have access to ultrasound. Nurses working in early pregnancy care will often triage prior to ultrasound and counsel women afterwards, consequently they are well placed to develop competency in ultrasound, which can improve continuity of care, patient experience and safety. When considering barriers to developing skills in ultrasound, discussions focused upon unit staffing and skill mix, funding, protected time for learning and appropriate mentors/supervisors.

The RCN supports:

- a postgraduate certificate in ultrasound is recommended in terms of clinical expertise, ability to analyse and synthesise information, and for medico-legal protection. The ultrasound course should be accredited by the Consortium for the Accreditation of Sonographic Education (CASE), or equivalent. Nurse sonographer roles should be identified in staffing reviews and ensure that there are specific roles to be trained into. They should also be identified as designated roles in rotas and consideration of staffing levels, as distinct responsibilities (for example from triage)
- some nurses (who have not studied at this level before) may require access to *level 7 study* assistance to access HEI courses
- protected time and funding should be standard to aid learning
- the learner should work with a clinical mentor* who can provide feedback, support and can assess their competence and development. It will also be useful to liaise with radiology/ultrasound colleagues and doctors for support
- once qualified, the nurse sonographer should be identified in that role for that shift, and not assumed into the numbers available to triage and care for patients
- the unit should have a peer review system in place, so that once qualified, nurse sonographers' practice is continually assessed, in line with the NMC Code (NMC, 2018) and they have access to ongoing mentorship and support, and regular clinical review of cases
- use national standards such as those developed for nurses by the Association of Early Pregnancy Units, which are available at: aepu.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/AEPU-ultrasound-standards-280321.pdf

* Coaching and Mentoring (NHS Leadership Academy (2022) leadershipacademy.nhs.uk/career-development/coaching-register

* CASE Validation and Accreditation handbook case-uk.org/handbook page 45 which clearly outlines the role and requirements of a mentor.

Non-medical prescribing

Non-medical prescribing has been shown to enhance patient care, however one of the challenges in early pregnancy care units is the opportunities for nurse practitioners to use these skills effectively to maintain competence.

Nurses working in advanced nurse practice roles in early pregnancy settings can prescribe within these settings if they are competent and it is within the job plan. RCN guidance provides further information about prescribing in pregnancy which is available at: [rcn.org.uk/clinical-topics/Medicines-management/Prescribing-in-pregnancy](https://www.rcn.org.uk/clinical-topics/Medicines-management/Prescribing-in-pregnancy)

The RCN recommends each unit should assess the need for non-medical prescribing and whether the need is better fulfilled via the use of Patient Group Directions (PGDs).

This can be undertaken with an audit to assess the number of prescriptions and type of prescriptions and if there was a delay in care provision, whilst waiting for a medical prescriber. Assessing the scope of the practitioner (early pregnancy and emergency gynaecology) and undertaking an audit of the unit is crucial to identifying whether a full non-medical prescribing course is appropriate and necessary.

However, it is a requirement for advanced level practice (RCN, 2021b) to have a non-medical prescribing qualification, therefore nurses within these settings who would like to progress their career progression to an advanced level should be supported to do so, taking account of:

- competency and maintaining skills
- revalidation with the NMC
- diversity of practice.

As with all areas of advanced practice it is essential that nurses audit their own practice and relate the learning needs back to their personalised development plans, performance development tools or appraisals.

Consent and delegated consent

All NMC registrants, who consent patients for treatment must be trained, competent and confident in information giving, discussing, listening and supporting decision making for consent. This should always be conducted in a manner and language, where the patient feels they have been giving sufficient opportunity to understand the risks and benefits of any treatment they may be about to undergo or refuse to undergo. This should include short- and long-term consequences of any decisions taken by them. Training should include:

- law and consent
- different types of consent
- assessing capacity (including for adults and children)
- the principles of consent
- the role of the courts.

Documented, signed consent must be obtained for all surgical procedures using a specifically designed consent form that clearly explains the proposed treatment, any alternatives to that treatment and the risk and complications associated with that treatment.

Ideally, consent should be achieved by the practitioner who will be performing the procedure. This is not always practical and so in some circumstances consent can be delegated to another registered practitioner who has been appropriately trained and understands the procedure and its associated risks.

Further guidance can be found at:

[rcn.org.uk/clinical-topics/consent](https://www.rcn.org.uk/clinical-topics/consent) and

[gmc-uk.org/ethical-guidance/ethical-guidance-for-doctors/decision-making-and-consent](https://www.gmc-uk.org/ethical-guidance/ethical-guidance-for-doctors/decision-making-and-consent)

Manual vacuum aspiration

Manual vacuum aspiration is a surgical procedure, usually undertaken under local anaesthetic, which empties the contents of the uterus. In an early pregnancy care unit setting, it is one of the options for surgical management of miscarriage under nine weeks gestation.

Manual vacuum aspirations can be undertaken either in an operating theatre or a suitable treatment room set up for minor surgery. Service configuration and extent of the service provided may determine the opportunities for nurses to develop this advanced skill. Often barriers to the service provision of manual vacuum aspirations within an early pregnancy care unit setting is the lack of a suitable surgical environment. In some areas, nurses have advanced their skills to include the provision of manual vacuum aspirations as part of their service, however they will need access to an on call gynaecologist, due to the risks associated with the procedure. Nurses performing MVAs have been developed to ensure continuity of care and to avoid delays with the management of miscarriage and retained products of conception.

The RCN recommends that registered nurses providing a manual vacuum aspiration service must be appropriately trained and supported by their managerial and medical colleagues to provide this service. They should also be supported via training and continuing professional development, with access to an accredited manual vacuum aspiration course, funding, mentorship, placements, and subsequent ongoing supervision. Provision of this service by a nurse would be seen as an advanced skill and should be recognised/rewarded as such.

Counselling and bereavement support

All nurses are educated to provide emotional support for those who may need it and should also be able to recognise when a patient requires more input, including therapeutic counselling.

It is also imperative to recognise that all women, regardless of gestation, may need counselling and/or bereavement support. A recent study by Farren et al., (2019) found that women experience high levels of post-traumatic stress, depression, and anxiety after early pregnancy loss. Whilst distress declines over time, it can remain clinically significant at nine months.

The Women's Health Strategy for England (DHSC, 2022) recognises the devastating impact of pregnancy loss, irrespective of gestation, and the variation in the level of support available from healthcare services. The Department of Health and Social Care recommends that following pregnancy loss, every woman and their partner who needs it, should have access to bereavement support (DHSC, 2022).

The RCN supports managing the disparities in the quality and consistency of bereavement care provided by:

- improving care pathways for women and their partners who experience pregnancy loss, to ensure support through bereavement and through future pregnancies, especially if they have experienced multiple early pregnancy losses
- all health care professionals involved in early pregnancy care should be able to offer the necessary emotional support needed and be aware when they need to refer on to an appropriately trained practitioner
- all health care professionals provide emotional support to women and their partners in line with the ethos of the *RCN Principles of Nursing Practice*. For further information visit: rcn.org.uk/Professional-Development/Principles-of-nursing-practice
- emotional support should not be confused with:
 - implications counselling – the provision of information to ensure that the woman understands the processes and risks associated with undergoing treatments
 - therapeutic counselling – carried out by trained/accredited counsellors/practitioners and focuses on helping individuals to understand their feelings and behaviour and learn how to change, where possible/if necessary (RCN, 2020).
- recognising that everyone's experience of pregnancy loss is completely individual and there is no 'one size fits all' when it comes to providing emotional support
- ensuring all bereaved parents are informed about and, if requested, referred for therapeutic counselling and for specialist mental health support when needed
- implementing the *National Bereavement Care Pathway Standards* which clearly define the care parents and families can expect to receive following a pregnancy loss, see: nbcpathway.org.uk/nbcp-standards
- offering health care professionals appropriate training and support to enable them to provide high-quality emotional care
- aiming for a bereavement lead in every health care setting where a pregnancy or baby loss may occur and that rooms are available and accessible in hospitals (DHSC, 2022).

Political awareness

Nursing is a political issue, because employment, practice, service provision and careers are affected by political decisions. It is especially relevant to the care provided to patients, which is also affected by the decisions made by government, consequently it is important for clinical nurse specialists to be politically aware.

As the largest group of health care providers in the UK, nurses are in a unique and powerful position to serve as advocates for patients, communities, and the nursing profession, by understanding how they can exert influence on, and lobby for better health care provision and policies.

The RCN supports the need for all clinical nurse specialists to have the skills to influence practice and become more aware of the politics that might impact and/or control that provision by:

- becoming more involved in the activities of professional organisations, so that nurses are seen and heard in health policy debates
- being more aware of the landscape around service commissioning and who to refer to, to ensure services are provided to meet the needs of those in their care
- working alongside organisations and individuals who champion similar causes to highlight the needs of women (and their partners) experiencing an early pregnancy complication
- engaging with elected officials and service commissioners to raise local issues or concerns with those who can influence change
- advocating for patients by facilitating open dialogue to ensure their voices are at the centre of service evaluation, provision, and future developments
- building strong working relationships with other local units, to improve care pathways through primary care services, emergency care, and gynaecology and obstetrics
- publishing evidence-based papers about early pregnancy care and associated health issues, and/or become research active to strengthen the clinical nurse specialist role in enhancing health care and improving patient outcomes
- talking about political issues with colleagues to encourage them to become more politically perceptive.

Conclusions

The *Clinical Nurse Standards Early Pregnancy Care Impact Assessment Report* (RCN, 2021c) demonstrated that the standards were valued in enhancing professional development and service provision, however they were not being used consistently throughout the UK.

In 2022, the project team has considered how improvements can be made by identifying the areas (detailed above), that can most influence positive change and enhance practice both for registrants and for patients. These are in:

- staffing for safe and effective care
- ultrasound scanning
- non-medical prescribing
- consent and delegated consent
- manual vacuum aspiration
- counselling and bereavement care
- political awareness.

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Appendix

The conclusion of the *Clinical Nurse Specialist Standards in Early Pregnancy Care Impact Assessment* project has led to the following key recommendations.

1. There is a continued requirement for clear local guidelines and care pathways, to ensure the safety of women, their partners and families, as well as the registrants caring for them.
2. There is a need for formal courses in ultrasound training, with appropriate local access to practice placements and mentoring, to enable the completion of required practice elements.
3. There is a need for more formal education for nurses in manual vacuum aspiration.
4. There is a need to develop a better understanding of the opportunities and possible barriers to nurses developing advanced skills such as ultrasound scanning, non-medical prescribing, and counselling.
5. There is a better understanding of delegated consent and this needs to be embedded in local services.
6. Further work is required around the clinical nurse specialist role development and its equity across the UK.
7. Implementation of the RCN standards should be considered in all units, regardless of size/configuration or geographical location. The RCN understands that different configurations of units exist, however consistency in learning across the sector and sharing good practice will improve services and job satisfaction for all.
8. To support clinical nurse specialist engagement with audit/research projects, presenting their findings at meetings.
9. There is a need to encourage nurses to be more actively engaged and involved in the local commissioning of services to better meet the needs of women who access their care.

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