

Measuring Change: Which Needs Can We No Longer Leave Unanswered?

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Those who have witnessed the evolution of nursing over recent decades recognize that few professions have undergone such profound transformation in such a relatively short period of time. The expansion of university education, the growth of nursing research, the development of professional leadership, the advancement of advanced practice roles, organizational innovation, and, more recently, the introduction of specialized master's degree programs have progressively redefined the role of nurses within contemporary healthcare systems (International Council of Nurses; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine [NASEM], 2021; World Health Organization [WHO], 2021).

For many years, professional debate appropriately focused on autonomy, disciplinary recognition, the consolidation of academic education, and the production of scientific knowledge. This was a necessary stage in the profession's development. It reflected a profession in the process of building its maturity and strengthening its identity (McCormack & McCance, 2017).

Today, however, when observing the speed and depth of current transformations, a question

emerges that rarely occupies the center of professional discussion.

Every phase of professional growth carries a potential risk: focusing attention on the instruments of change rather than on the reasons that make change necessary.

Mature professions are distinguished not only by their capacity to innovate but also by their ability to determine which needs should guide innovation. For this reason, the most important question does not concern the competencies we will acquire. Rather, it concerns the needs to which we intend to respond. Which health needs do we now consider so important that they justify this ongoing transformation?

The history of healthcare professions is often narrated through the competencies they acquire. New knowledge, emerging technologies, expanded roles, greater responsibilities, and innovative educational pathways represent the most visible milestones of professional evolution. While this narrative is accurate, it is not sufficient.

The professions that have truly transformed people's health are not remembered primarily for

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the tools they developed. They are remembered for the needs they successfully addressed. This distinction may appear subtle; in reality, it is fundamental.

Nursing currently finds itself in the midst of one of the most significant transformations in its history. A new competency does not automatically constitute progress. It becomes progress when it enables a more effective response to a need that previously remained unmet. For nursing, this principle aligns with its deepest purpose: caring. Professions rarely lose their identity because they change. They lose it when they forget why they change. The central challenge facing contemporary nursing is not deciding which competencies to acquire. Rather, it is deciding which needs we cannot afford to leave unanswered (ICN, n.d.; NASEM, 2021; WHO, 2025).

Population aging, multimorbidity, increasing social isolation among older adults, social vulnerabilities, inequities in access to care, and new forms of exclusion generated by digital transformation all represent challenges that call into question the very meaning and purpose of the profession (NASEM, 2021; WHO, 2021).

Not every innovation creates value. Not every form of progress generates health. Not every technological advancement improves care. The defining criterion remains unchanged: the ability to respond effectively to the needs of individuals and communities. This principle is particularly relevant in an era increasingly shaped by digital health technologies, where innovation must remain grounded in person-centered care and equitable access to health services (McCormack & McCance, 2017).

It is within this perspective that The Nursing Forum Palermo 2027 assumes particular significance. Professional communities grow through discussions about competencies. They mature through discussions about the purposes those competencies are intended to serve. Recent history demonstrates that nursing is capable of change. The challenge that lies ahead is more complex: determining the direction that change should take. The competencies we acquire will define what we are capable of doing, but the needs we choose not to leave unanswered will ultimately define who we are as a profession.

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