

# *American Association of Critical-Care Nurses*

## **HISTORY OF AACN**

Established in 1969 to help educate nurses working in newly developed intensive care units, the American Association of Critical-Care Nurses (AACN) is the world's largest specialty nursing organization.

The first intensive care units (ICUs) were developed in the 1950s in response to the need for special areas in hospitals that could provide complex care for critically ill patients, such as polio victims. As a result of the specialized care, patient survival rates improved dramatically, generating a call for additional units capable of caring for seriously ill patients with heart disease. Once these cardiac care units were developed in the 1960s, the need for nursing specialists in intensive care increased significantly.

By 1967, specialized nurses were in the workforce, but there was still a lack of continuing education opportunities for intensive care nurses. Realizing this, nurses at Nashville's Baptist Hospital mailed postcards to approximately 400 nurses in the United States asking if they would be interested in forming a national organization to disseminate information relating to coronary care nursing. One year later, more than 400 nurses attended a cardiac nursing symposium and confirmed the need to form a national specialty nursing organization.

AACN was established in 1969 as the American Association of Cardiovascular Nurses, thanks to the efforts of those nurses and the support of physicians who understood the need for qualified nurses with specialized skills. At the time, the association's purpose was to help educate cardiovascular nurses working in newly developed intensive and cardiac care units. In 1971, the association adopted its current name — the American Association of Critical-Care Nurses — to include all nurses who care for critically ill patients, regardless of the setting or diagnosis. Since then, AACN through its leadership, products and services, has kept pace with the advances in medicine and technology that affect the care of patients with complex problems.

Today, AACN represents the interests of more than 500,000 nurses who have the responsibility of caring for acutely and critically ill patients. The association is dedicated to providing its members with the knowledge and resources necessary to provide optimal care to these patients and their families. In addition to a monthly newsletter, AACN publishes a scientific research journal, a clinical magazine for the practicing nurse, and a quarterly series for advanced practice nurses.

Established in 1974, the National Teaching Institute & Critical Care Exposition® is the cornerstone of AACN's business. The National Teaching Institute is the premier clinical education program for nurses caring for patients with critical and complex health problems. NTI curriculum offers a variety of formal, self-paced and interactive sessions covering a wide range of clinical content relevant to bedside nurses, managers, nurse practitioners, clinical nurse specialists and nurse educators. The Critical Care Exposition is the largest and most comprehensive trade show for acute, advanced practice and critical care nurses. Approximately 500 companies exhibit annually, presenting more than 7,000 NTI participants with the latest in healthcare equipment, devices, supplies and pharmaceuticals, plus training materials, publications, education and career opportunities.

In 1975, AACN Certification Corporation was founded to provide comprehensive credentialing for nurses who establish and maintain standards of excellence in acute and critical care nursing and who contribute to the achievement of optimal health outcomes for persons experiencing acute and life-threatening illness. AACN Certification Corporation accomplishes its mission by providing certification exams, programs and credentialing opportunities for nurse practitioners in acute and critical care. The CCRN credential was introduced in 1976. In 1999, the CCNS credential for clinical nurse specialists was added. The PCCN credential was added in 2004 for progressive care nurses. In 2005, two subspecialty certifications in cardiac medicine (CMC) and cardiac surgery (CSC) were introduced, and the ACNPC certification for acute care nurse practitioners was launched in 2007. The CNML certification for nurse managers and leaders, in collaboration with the American Organization of Nurse Executives (AONE), was launched in 2008.

In 2002, AACN released a definitive report on the benefits that specialty certification for nurses bring to the public, employers and to nurses themselves. Titled *Safeguarding the Patient and the Profession: The Value of Critical Care Nurse Certification*, the report put forth a call to action for all who can influence and will benefit from certified nurses' contribution to patient care. It also supports the growing body of evidence that proves the right skill mix and number of qualified nurses is necessary for optimal patient outcomes. This white paper is a major part of AACN's initiative to raise awareness of the value of nurse certification.

Also in 2002, AACN launched the Essentials of Critical Care Orientation (ECCO), a self-paced, interactive, Web-based program that focuses on the fundamentals, providing the theoretical foundation necessary to care for critically ill patients. The addition in 2005 of the Basic ECG Interpretation module (available separately) addresses the learning needs of nurses in specialty cardiac care and progressive care/telemetry units. ECCO 2.0 (an upgrade to the original program) was launched in 2008. It includes more interactivity, case studies and critical thinking exercises. To date, more than 700 institutions have implemented this educational program.

In 2003, the Beacon Award for Critical Care Excellence was established to recognize critical care nursing units that achieve the highest-quality outcomes. Applicants are rated on factors including nurse recruitment and retention, staff training, patient outcomes, healthy work environments, leadership and evidence-based practice and research. In 2006, AACN expanded the award to include progressive care units and then added pediatric units in 2008. The Beacon Award is presented twice a year.

In 2004, AACN conducted the National Critical Care Survey of 300 critical care units in 120 hospitals. In addition to traditional ICUs, the study surveyed other hospital areas where acutely and critically ill patients are cared for, including progressive care, telemetry units and step-down units. It's the first survey report designed to break down results at the specialty level. The profile of the facilities and units surveyed was published in the January 2006 issue of the *American Journal of Critical Care*.

In 2005, AACN introduced *AACN Standards for Establishing and Sustaining Healthy Work Environments: A Journey to Excellence*, which puts forth six essential elements that must be in place for work environments to thrive and contribute to improved patient and system outcomes. These are Skilled Communication, True Collaboration, Effective Decision Making, Appropriate Staffing, Meaningful Recognition and Authentic Leadership. The publishing and distribution of these standards are the critical first steps in AACN fulfilling its commitment to actively promote healthy work environments that support and foster excellence in patient care wherever acute and critical care nurses practice. The creation of healthy work environments is AACN's highest advocacy priority.

In 2006, AACN collaborated with *Nursing Spectrum* and Bernard Hodes Group to conduct their first RN Work Environment Survey. The project was designed to help the partner organizations better understand the environments in which nurses work and what elements of the work environment most influence their decisions to stay in a position or to move on. The findings, reported in the October 2006 issue of *Critical Care Nurse*, suggest that the majority of critical care nurses are very satisfied with nursing as a career; however, for many, issues remain in the work environment that cause dissatisfaction with their roles. When asked to report on the health of elements in their organizational environments vs. their unit environments, the majority rated their units considerably healthier than their organization as a whole on most factors. Improved leadership emerged as one of the primary factors that would influence nurses' decisions to leave their positions.

In 2007, AACN introduced Essentials of Nurse Manager Orientation™, a comprehensive Web-based e-learning program for frontline managers, charge nurses, aspiring managers and leadership staff that addresses the issues nurse managers face every day. Developed by a distinguished panel of experts and modeled after the Nurse Manager Leadership Collaborative's Learning Domain Framework, this program is offered through a partnership with the American Organization of Nurse Executives (AONE). In 2008, AACN introduced two new e-learning programs: "The Preceptor Challenge" and "Promoting Excellence in Palliative and End of Life Care." Essential skills can be learned and practiced in a safe, virtual environment to improve real-life performance.