**Primary nursing**

**Originated in 1969 by staff nurses at the University of Minnesota, primary nursing is a system of** [**nursing**](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nursing) **care delivery which emphasizes continuity of care and responsibility acceptance by having one registered nurse (RN), often teamed with a licensed practical nurse (LPN) and/or nursing assistant (NA), who together provide complete care for a group of patients throughout their stay in a hospital unit or department. For the duration of a patient’s episode of care, the primary nurse accepts responsibility for administering some and coordinating all aspects of the patient’s nursing care. When RNs supervise LPNs and NAs in the care of patients, costs associated with labor and other resources typically decrease while more attentive, well-coordinated care is provided for patients, increasing patient satisfaction and safety.**

**This is distinguished from the practice of** [**team nursing**](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Team_nursing)**, functional nursing, or total patient care, in that primary nursing focuses on the therapeutic relationship between a patient and a named nurse who assumes responsibility for a patient’s plan of care for their length of stay in a particular area.**

[**Marie Manthey**](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marie_Manthey)**, one of the originators of this care delivery system and the author of *The Practice of Primary Nursing* (2002), asserts that a nursing system can enhance and facilitate either professional or bureaucratic values as it either focuses on caring for people or tending to the needs of an organization. From *The Practice of Primary Nursing*, “Primary Nursing is a delivery system for nursing at the station level that facilitates professional nursing practice despite the bureaucratic nature of hospitals. The practice of any profession is based on an independent assessment of a client’s needs which determines the kind and amount of service to be rendered: services in bureaucracies are usually delivered according to routine pre-established procedures without sensitivity to variations in needs.**

**A delivery system is a set of organizing principles that is used to deliver a product or service and generally consist of four elements: decision-making, work allocation, communication, and management.The following table illustrates the similarities and differences between the four most common nursing care delivery systems:**

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Element** | **Functional nursing** | **Team nursing** | **Total patient care** | **Primary nursing** |
| **Decision-making** | **Decision-making occurs over a single shift; decisions usually made by nurse manager or charge nurse.** | **Decision-making occurs over a single shift; largely by team leader or nurse manager.** | **Decision-making occurs over a single shift—either by an****RN caring for the patient or by a charge nurse.** | **RN makes decisions for individual patients based on their therapeutic relationship, which is sustained for the length of stay of the patient on the unit.** |
| **Work allocation and/or patient assignment** | **Nursing assignments are task-based; nurses are assigned to tasks rather than patients.** | **Nursing assignments are based on level of complexity and commensurate level of expertise; focus is on tasks to be accomplished; assignments change based on patient acuity and work complexity.** | **Nursing assignments are largely patient-based, with RN providing activities of care. Nursing assignments may vary by shift based on geography and patient acuity, without supporting continuity of care.** | **Nurse assignments are patient-based to ensure continuity of care. An RN is assigned to a patient and remains that patient’s primary nurse for as long as the patient remains on the unit (unless circumstances require that a new primary nurse is assigned).** |
| **Communication** | **Communication is** **hierarchical; task** **completion is** **documented and** **communicated to the** **charge nurse; the** **charge nurse pulls** **information together** **for all patients and** **communicates with** **other members of the** **health care team.** | **Communication is hierarchical; the care provider reports to the team leader; the team leader reports to physicians and/or other health care team members.** | **Communication is direct. However, in some Total Patient Care systems, RNs may be required to communicate with physicians and other members of the health care team through a charge nurse.** |  |
| **Management of the unit or environment of care** | **Managers function as overseers, assuring that tasks are accomplished.** | **Nurse manager supervises the team leader who is responsible for supervising other staff in the delivery of care.** | Managers serve as a resource and promote nurses having a stronger role in care decisions. | Managers promote the nurse-patient relationship and the professional role of the nurse. They influence care by creating a healthy work environment and empowering the staff to remove barriers to care. |
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**From the book *Relationship-Based Care: A Model for Transforming Practice* (2004), Mary Koloroutis, editor. Used by permission**