

## Editorial

# The Future of Nurse-Led Research: The Road Ahead

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## Abstract

### Description

Nursing as a profession is full of innovation. From nurse-led research and new technology to emerging models of care, nurses continue to blaze trails and take steps to improve patient care. As one of the largest employers of nurses in the United States, HCA Healthcare has an obligation to produce research and evidence-based practices to pave the way for the future of nursing practice and potentially change how care is delivered. In this editorial, HCA Healthcare's chief nurse officer describes her vision for the future of nurse-led research and examines how education, partnerships, and technology facilitate the road ahead for nurses.

### Keywords

academic partnerships; nursing; nurse leaders; nurse-led research; nursing innovations; nursing education; patient care team; technology

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## Introduction

"Nurse Forward" is more than just a slogan. It represents the importance of nurses from all backgrounds, geographic locations, and tenures in advancing health care, research, and innovation. "Nurse Forward" aligns with the American Nurses Association code of conduct for nurses under provision 7, which reads, "the nurse, in all roles and settings, advances the profession through research and scholarly inquiry, professional standards development, and the generation of both nursing and health policy."<sup>1</sup> Our scale as a profession supports this advancement. Internationally, nurses are estimated to make up 2 out of every 3 health care workers.<sup>2</sup> In the US, the estimate is smaller but no less impressive, with 1 in 5 members of the health care workforce being a nurse.<sup>3</sup> At HCA Healthcare, one of the largest employers of nurses in the United States, more than 100 000 nurses (including more than 10 000 nurse leaders) show up to our facilities every day helping us live our mission, which is that above all else, we are committed to the care and improvement of human life.<sup>4</sup>

As an enterprise of such scale, HCA Healthcare also holds incomparably large data sets that can be queried to discover the health care solutions of tomorrow. With this amount of data, HCA Healthcare has an obligation to produce nurse-led research and evidence-based practices that can pave the way for the future of nursing and potentially change how care is delivered. Meeting these obligations, however, is no easy task. As a profession, nursing continues to face challenges, ranging from an aging workforce to health care reform.<sup>5</sup> Despite these challenges, we have a responsibility to advance nurse-led research and scholarly work through strong nursing education as well as partnerships, technology use, and novel models of care.

### Investing in Nursing Education

To accelerate nurse-led research and scholarly work, education is key. From the encouragement of student nurses to the creation of pathways to produce more professional expert nurses, academic pursuits and training elevate nurses, aid professional growth, and contribute to the "Nurse Forward" agenda. On an institu-



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tional level, it is important we support models of care that allow nursing professionals to work at the top of their licenses.

One way HCA Healthcare supports nursing education and development is through our permanent partnership with Galen College of Nursing, created through our acquisition in 2020. Galen offers nursing degrees at the associate, bachelor, master, and doctorate levels, providing opportunities for nurse-led research and scholarly work at every step of the way. Currently, over 3000 of our nursing staff at HCA Healthcare are actively enrolled at Galen,<sup>6</sup> where they are advancing their knowledge in clinical care and translational research skills. As one of the largest undergraduate nursing colleges in the United States,<sup>7</sup> HCA Healthcare once again has an obligation to lead the “Nurse Forward” agenda by arming all nurses, including new and student nurses, with the tools they need to lead scholarly work and bring improved care practice to the world.

### **Partnering to Enhance Research and Data Opportunities**

The path to advancing nursing research and scholarly work is through partnerships. In particular, fostering and deepening HCA Healthcare’s partnerships with academic centers, fellow health systems, federal agencies, and industry partners is vital to the future growth of nurse-led research and scholarly work. Partnerships provide an opportunity to build credibility, strength, and joint expertise to help solve the challenges faced by nursing today. For example, HCA Healthcare’s scale and span of influence in over 21 states and the United Kingdom results in large data sets, which provide an ideal foundation for academic partnerships for research nursing strategies and improve clinical practices. Positive outcomes include reducing workload burdens, enhancing evidence-based practices that improve nursing-sensitive indicators (NSIs), and improving nurse satisfaction and retention. This unprecedented scope presents an ideal opportunity for HCA Healthcare to oversee nurse-led research and scholarly work, standardize guidelines, and establish best practices across the health care landscape.

In addition to partnerships, research data has the opportunity to amplify and empower the

voice of the nurse. Behind every research or scholarly project is an untapped opportunity to analyze large data sets, describe what nurses at the front line are experiencing, and discuss ways to build from past work, thereby influencing and elevating the future of nursing excellence. The potential opportunities for using data to advance the field are limitless. As an example, nurses use all types of tools, instruments, and products daily, such as support surfaces on beds. Many nurses prefer one surface over another based on informal observations of efficacy for different patient populations. Nurses have both an opportunity and an obligation to investigate these observations formally, by adding structure to their data, quality improvement programs, and anecdotes, and to share their findings with other organizations. By disseminating their work, nurses drive the profession forward and improve NSIs and patient care beyond the walls of their hospitals.

### **Leveraging Technology to Improve Outcomes**

Technology is another area that supports nurse-led research and scholarly work. In particular, technology can improve the nurse’s ability to generate insights into trends in patient care or process deeper patterns throughout their work. More specifically, access to data allows nurse leaders to understand operational strengths and areas that need additional attention. Seeing that data in real-time can prevent potential harm or quickly drive improvements. At HCA Healthcare, we use a real-time data tool called Next-gen Analytics for Treatment and Efficiency (NATE<sup>®</sup>) to validate or identify areas of focus. NATE provides a view into current hospital operations that allow clinicians to react quickly in real-time. This use of technology minimizes the need to search through individual patient charts, thereby improving efficiencies for our nurse leaders.

A great example of using technology to remove administrative barriers is virtual nursing, which allows nurses to provide non-hands-on duties in a virtual setting. So far, both patients and nurses have enjoyed the ease of communication and uninterrupted screen time together. We consider virtual nursing to be a win-win, with enormous potential for the future of advancing care delivery.

## Advancing Our Understanding of Nursing Models of Care

One of the most dynamic and important areas for nursing research or scholarly work right now is evaluating, testing, and implementing innovative models of care. HCA Healthcare believes all colleagues impact patient outcomes through the power of interprofessional teams, and the most effective care models provide nurses with enough support to work at the top of their licenses. Our people are paramount in achieving this goal; it takes a variety of important roles to create a smoothly operating model of care delivery. Patient care technicians may be the largest nursing resource in our organization, and their tremendous efforts are vital for nursing support. Not only do they help free nurses for other tasks and research, but they also have an enormous influence on patient outcomes. For example, the countless responsibilities of patient care techs, such as observing the patients' skin during baths, ambulating patients, and even brushing teeth, are vital for NSI mitigation. Similarly, transporters and phlebotomists are important care partners since they allow nurses more time for delivering patient care.

Another innovative model of care at HCA Healthcare addresses the deep national shortage of nursing. Within our organization, a prime example of this model is the Clinical Support Resource Nurse (CSRN), a new concept and role for expert nurses. The CSRN is an expert nurse who provides full-time support to new nurses through mentorship, skill development, prioritization assistance, and emotional support. After implementing this role, new nurses have reported increased levels of support, leading to greater competency and retention. Overall, models of care are rife with research opportunities and quality improvement to further investigate different frameworks of care.

## Nursing Strategy and Nurse Forward: Full Speed Ahead

As we consider all that the nursing profession has achieved so far, we also look toward the future and how to best realize the "Nurse Forward" agenda. With so much excitement in the field, prioritization can be a challenge. My vision for the future of nursing centers around

the following strategic pillars: 1) leadership and advocacy to develop empowered leaders who can advocate for and support care team growth and wellbeing; 2) clinical education to enhance the clinical expertise of our care teams through skill-building and hands-on educational opportunities; 3) a dynamic care team to optimize care team models that best match clinical expertise with patient needs; and 4) a care first culture to champion a professional practice environment where care teams feel supported to deliver high-quality patient care.

The future of nursing has a great deal of potential for growth. Using these 4 pillars as a strategic guide, the field can improve patient care, nurse engagement, innovation, and nurse-led research. Now is the time for us to build on the energy and momentum around what is possible in the future and embrace HCA Healthcare's "Nurse Forward" agenda.

## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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