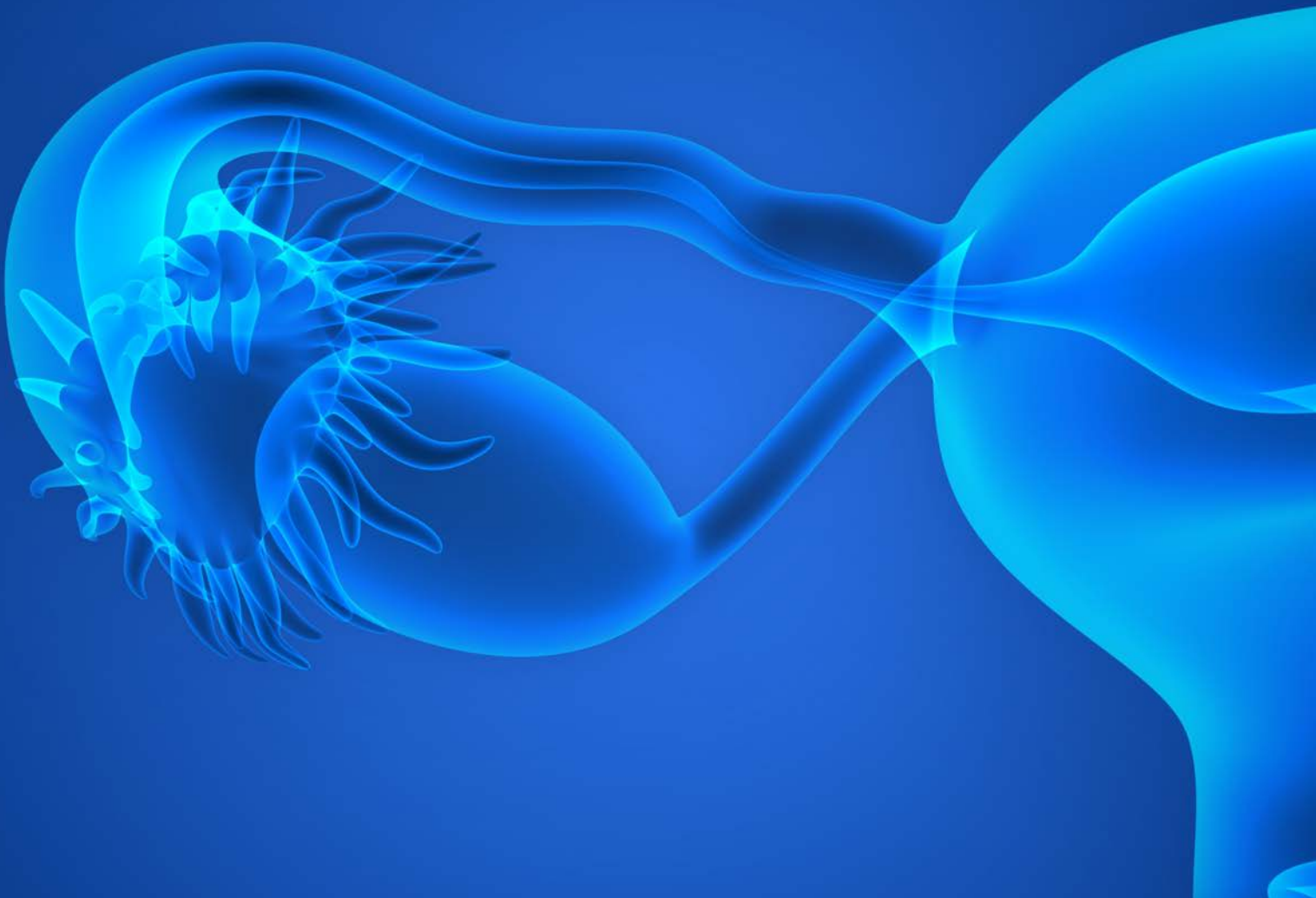




Royal College
of Nursing

Advanced Level Practice for Fertility Nursing

CLINICAL PROFESSIONAL RESOURCE



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This document has been designed in collaboration with our members to ensure it meets most accessibility standards. However, if this does not fit your requirements, please contact corporate.communications@rcn.org.uk

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Notes

It is recognised that services are provided by registered nurses and midwives, health care support workers, assistant practitioners, nursing associates and student nurses and midwives, and trainee nursing associates. For ease of reading, the generic terms ‘nurse’, ‘nursing’ and ‘nurses’ are used throughout this document.

The RCN recognises and embraces our gender diverse society and encourages this guideline to be used by and/or applied to people who identify as non-binary, transgender or gender fluid.

The RCN also recognises that not all those born female, or male will identify with the same gender nouns, but for ease of reading, use the term women/men and where appropriate acknowledge non-binary terms.

1. Introduction

In contemporary health care nurses and midwives are a critical part of delivering, improving and developing clinical care and the patient experience. Nurses work within fertility care across all levels of nursing ([rcn.org.uk/Professional-Development/Levels-of-nursing](https://www.rcn.org.uk/Professional-Development/Levels-of-nursing)) and ensuring career progression through these levels is essential to developing the profession of nursing.

Fertility nursing offers opportunities for advanced level roles, and this publication aims to outline the roles, and ways in which nurses and/or midwives could transition to advanced level practice.

It is also noted that for midwives working in fertility care settings their overall practice needs to take account of NMC revalidation to midwifery standards (NMC, 2021). The RCN has also published guidance to clarify this for midwives working outside of maternity care settings, which can be found here (RCN, 2024a).

Evidence suggests that there is a wide variation in employer understanding and approach to these roles with differing expectations (Devereux, 2023). The need for standardisation has also recently been highlighted in an independent report from the Nuffield Trust in 2023 ([nuffieldtrust.org.uk/research/independent-report-on-the-regulation-of-advanced-practice-in-nursing-and-midwifery](https://www.nuffieldtrust.org.uk/research/independent-report-on-the-regulation-of-advanced-practice-in-nursing-and-midwifery)). The aim of this guidance is to identify the skills required and produce a framework for fertility nurses to progress their careers.

There are a number of RCN resources and tools, which can be used to articulate the requirements for advanced practice, including:

- RCN Advanced Level Practice Standards [rcn.org.uk/Professional-Development/publications/rcn-professional-development-framework-advanced-level-nursing-uk-pub-011-127](https://www.rcn.org.uk/Professional-Development/publications/rcn-professional-development-framework-advanced-level-nursing-uk-pub-011-127)
- RCN Workforce Standards [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)
- RCN Professional Framework ([rcn.org.uk/news-and-events/news/uk-rcn-defines-levels-of-nursing-beyond-registration-100524](https://www.rcn.org.uk/news-and-events/news/uk-rcn-defines-levels-of-nursing-beyond-registration-100524))

These are all used to outline the expectations of these roles.

Advanced level standards

“Advanced level nursing describes a level which can only be delivered by registered nurses with substantial experience and expertise. This level can be applied to the full range of registered nurses’ careers, and not solely particular roles or specific organisational contexts. The advanced level is differentiated from other levels by a registered nurse’s expertise in applying highly developed theoretical and practical knowledge to complex, unpredictable, and sometimes unfamiliar situations, through use of critical thinking, high-level decision making and exercising professional judgement. It is underpinned by a comprehensive range of knowledge, skills, and capabilities within each of the 4 pillars of nursing, namely clinical practice, education, research, and leadership. These will have been developed through studying a full master’s degree in a relevant subject area with experiential learning or by demonstrating equivalence.

Integration of all the capabilities across the 4 pillars, together with critical reflection, is

key to enable an advanced level nurse to function to their full potential and optimise their autonomy within their context of employment” (RCN, 2024b).

Nurses working at an advanced level are usually educated at master’s level and have been assessed as competent in practice using their expert clinical knowledge and skills. They have the freedom and authority to act, making autonomous decisions in the assessment, diagnosis and treatment of patients.

The International Council of Nurses (ICN) defines an advanced practice nurse as a generalist or specialised nurse who has acquired, through additional graduate education (minimum of a master’s degree), the expert knowledge base, complex decision-making skills and clinical competencies for advanced nursing practice, the characteristics of which are shaped by the context in which they are credentialed to practice (adapted from ICN, 2008, [icn.ch/system/files/documents/2020-04/ICN_APN%20Report_EN_WEB.pdf](https://www.icn.ch/system/files/documents/2020-04/ICN_APN%20Report_EN_WEB.pdf)).

Registered nurses working at this level should meet the following standards:

- have an active registration with the NMC
- practice within the four pillars of advanced nursing (clinical practice, leadership, education and research)
- have a job plan that demonstrates advanced nursing practice and has equity with peers working at this level
- be educated to master’s level
- be an independent prescriber
- meet NMC revalidation requirements
- demonstrate autonomous evidence.

Core standards for advanced level nursing (RCN, 2024b)

The knowledge base and skills for this level of nursing is influenced by the context in which individuals practise, but all advanced level registered nurses will demonstrate the following capabilities.

- Take full responsibility for and optimise their freedom to act, with commitment to, and evidence of, operating at the highest standards across all 4 pillars of advanced level nursing.
- Apply a systematic, authoritative, and tacit understanding of current knowledge, advanced skills, and related issues in their field and at the interface of other fields. This includes current and emerging technology. They will proactively develop new skills and approaches in response to emerging knowledge and techniques.
- Create an evidence-based judgement about a particular issue by integrating knowledge from new or existing sources, including those from other disciplines, and in situations with incomplete, contradictory, or limited information. This utilises their ability to interpret, analyse, evaluate, synthesise, and infer.
- Demonstrate a holistic grasp of complex situations, perceiving the overall picture and alternative approaches, with a vision of what may be possible.

- Communicate complex issues clearly and effectively to a wide range of stakeholders, selecting and applying a range of methods and approaches.
- Demonstrate vigilance by systematically monitoring, assessing, proactively challenging situations, actions and behaviours and acting to maintain safety and minimise risk.
- Work in a collaborative, compassionate way, promoting equality, respecting diversity, and ensuring inclusivity, taking responsibility for challenging behaviour that does not align with these values.
- Extensive use of critical reflection in action and on action particularly in complicated, unpredictable, unfamiliar, and complex situations.
- Demonstrate reflexivity by recognising how their own actions, thoughts, feelings and values effect other people and situations.

Nursing Workforce Standards

Workforce standards can be used by advanced nursing practitioners to support and direct safer and effective staffing in all areas of fertility nursing. The RCN *Nursing Workforce Standards* can be used by all to enhance care provision.

The standards are set out in 3 distinct themes, which can be used to constantly assess, agree and support safe and effective staffing levels.

These themes are:

- responsibility and accountability: these 4 standards outline where the responsibility and accountability lie within an organisation for setting, reviewing and taking decisions and actions regarding the nursing workforce
- clinical leadership and safety: these 6 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 4 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 RCN's *Nursing Workforce 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)

RCN Professional Framework: This is Nursing

The RCN Professional Framework aims to articulate and clarify the differing roles and responsibilities in nursing and clarify role progression. Table 1 below outlines the possible career pathways from nursing support workers to advance practice in fertility nursing.

Table 1: Role progression in fertility nursing care

Role progression in nursing	Opportunities to enhance knowledge and understanding of fertility nursing care practice
Nursing support worker, pre-registration nursing student, student nurse associate (working under supervision) and nursing associates.	Foster interest in fertility nursing care.
Registered nurses and midwives and nurse associates at all levels providing care across all ages in general/non-specialist settings.	All nurses should have some understanding of fertility nursing care including an awareness of the reproductive systems and lifestyle choices.
Registered nurses and midwives at registration providing care in fertility.	Develop knowledge and skills at looking after women in settings such as day surgery, hysteroscopy clinics and outpatients' clinics.
Registered nurses and midwives at enhanced level providing care in fertility.	All nurses should have a deep understanding of reproductive systems and hormone profiles such as premature ovarian failure, endometriosis and polycystic ovarian syndrome. Undertaking specialist post-registration courses in fertility nursing to underpin specialist roles in areas such as sperm/egg/embryo donation and surrogacy.
Registered nurses and midwives at advanced level providing care in fertility.	Develop a sub specialist or generalist role in fertility nursing – undertake a master's and courses to enhance practice, such as non-medical prescribing, ultrasound scanning and clinical leadership. To demonstrate expert abilities in patient advocacy.
Registered nurses and midwives at consultant level providing care in fertility.	Develop a sub specialist or generalist role in fertility nursing – undertake a master's and courses to enhance practice, such as independent nurse prescribing, nurse seditionist, pelvic ultrasound, oocyte retrieval and embryo transfer. To demonstrate strong leadership and autonomy within fertility care.

The RCN Education and Career Progression Framework for Fertility Nursing provides further detailed information on progression and is available at: rcn.org.uk/Professional-Development/publications/rcn-education-and-career-progression-framework-for-fertility-nursing-uk-pub-011-692

It also recognises that not every nurse/midwife will aspire to the attainment of master's level advanced practice, whilst encouraging all nurses to reach the maximum potential expected of their role in the context of competence and knowledge.

Table 2 and 3 below provide an overview of potential pathways towards advanced level practice in fertility care settings.

Table 2: Requirements for newly qualified registered nurses working in fertility nursing or those wishing to change roles

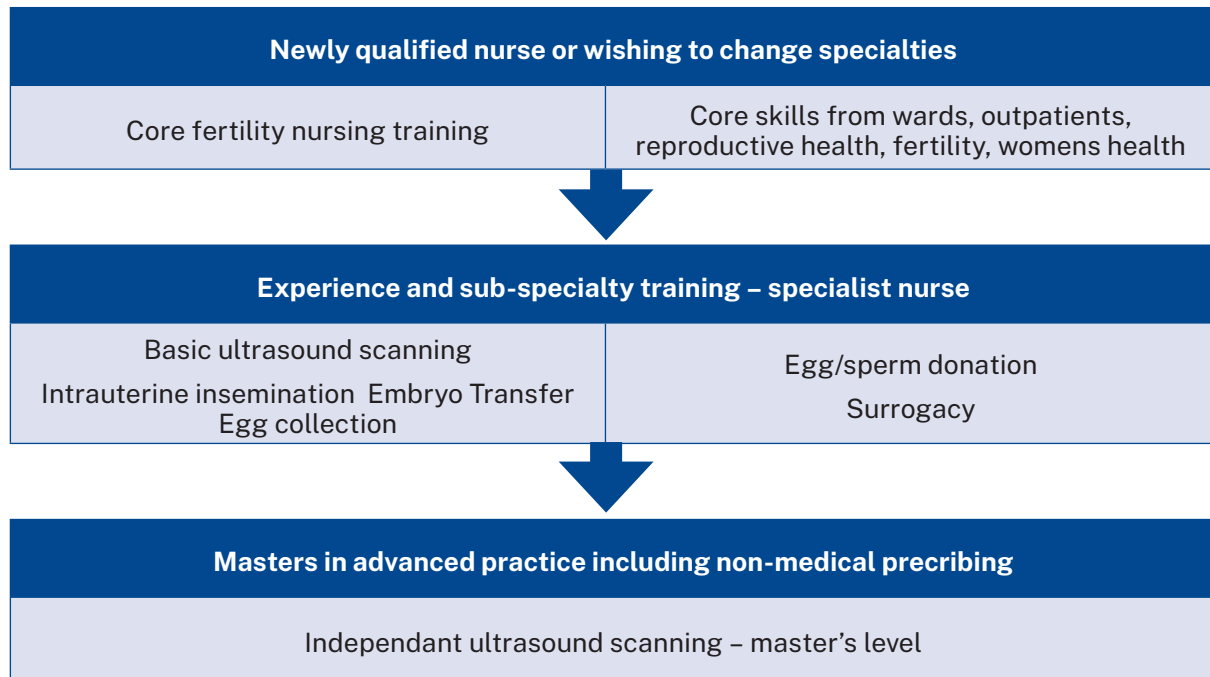


Table 3: Example of an advanced level practice pathway for fertility nurses

Example of an advanced level practice pathway for a fertility nurse:

The initial training post for 2-3 years, during which time fertility nurses are expected to complete an advanced practice master’s and accreditation/qualification/competence in:

- embryo transfers/IUI (to include trial of catheter and endometrial biopsy)
- pelvic ultrasound
- non-medical prescribing
- IVF consultations (initial consultations only).

Undertaking oocyte collections is desirable but not essential to the role initially.

As there is limited access to specialised fertility advanced practice master’s programmes, nurses are encouraged and supported to undertake a generic advanced clinical practitioner master’s, where they can adapt modules to meet the requirements for advanced fertility care.

2. Advanced practice in fertility nursing

The emergence of advanced level practice, together with the extension and expansion of nursing skills, has led to the development of specialist nurses and advanced level practitioners within fertility nursing. However, as with advanced practitioner roles in other specialties, the educational pathway and role remit lacks clarity, consistency and standardisation (Dover et al., 2019).

These roles are known by a variety of titles such as clinical nurse specialist, advanced practice, nurse practitioner, advanced nurse practitioner, advanced level practitioners and nurse consultant, with limited guidance or regulation on the educational requirements of the role being undertaken. This may create confusion for employers, nurses, other health care professionals and patients who may be unsure of the scope and/or limits of practice roles.

These roles may be grouped by bands of pay and some may have a specific skill attached such as nurse sonographer, nurse seditionist, or specialist in surrogacy arrangements. The following competencies hope to address some of the confusion, and for ease of reading the text uses the advanced level practitioners, in line with the RCN's advanced level practice publication (2024).

Advanced nursing practice is about having the right professional, in the right place at the right time to ensure that the patient has the correct care needed, and not necessarily about having direct medical support. The concepts of accountability, higher-level decision making and autonomy are synonymous with advanced practice resulting in a unique nursing role in comparison to other frontline nurses (Kerr and Macaskill, 2020).

Whatever the career path, there are many sources of help and inspiration in practice, from identifying gaps, to developing the skills and knowledge required, as well as devising new roles and networking with others, who have progressed to more senior roles.

Factors that may impact on the expansion and development of the roles, include:

- clarity around the role
- recognition of prior learning and credentialing
- availability and financial support for education for these expanded roles in provider terms
- individuals' ideas/understanding of the breadth/depth of the role
- support from peers and other professionals, patients and organisations
- overall costs and salary
- an appropriate mentor in place and ongoing mentorship with protected time and funding should be standard to aid learning
- the learner should have access to and work alongside a clinical mentor* who can provide feedback and support, and who can assess their competence and development
- the unit should have a peer review system in place, so that once qualified, advanced level practitioners/nurses' practice is continually assessed, in line with the NMC Code (NMC, 2018), and they have access to ongoing mentorship and support, and regular clinical reviews of cases.

* Coaching and Mentoring (NHS Leadership Academy, 2022) available at: leadershipacademy.nhs.uk/programmes/coaching-and-mentoring

Difference between clinical nurse specialist and advanced practice

There are growing demands on health care because of changing population health needs which, coupled with service redesign, has provided opportunities for the nursing profession to develop and expand roles, scope and practice. The International Council of Nurses (ICN, 2020) stated that the advanced level role “is fundamentally a nursing role, built on nursing principles”, and identifies a clinical nurse specialist and nurse practitioner as the two most common.

There is confusion and ambiguity with the many titles and roles, and there is little correlation between job title and pay. The ICN draws a clear distinction between the roles of clinical nurse specialist and Nurse practitioner (both of which may be advanced level roles) and acknowledges the confusion suggesting that these are best understood as being on a continuum.

Table 4: Clinical nurse specialist and advanced level practice

There is a different scope of practice and focus, although both are expected to be educated to at least master’s level, practice autonomously and are accountable to an advanced level.

The clinical nurse specialist, as expert clinician, has a focus on clinical excellence, a specialist area of practice and is more likely to engage in non-clinical and indirect care activities.

Advanced level nursing practice has greater direct involvement and autonomy in patient care particularly in relation to activities such as diagnosis, prescription and treatment of conditions.

The clinical nurse specialist is a job role, not a level of practice, and can fall within the enhanced, advanced or consultant level of practice definition. Specialist nurses and/or midwives may be clinical specialists within a specific clinical area, for example surrogacy or ultrasound, focusing on a specific population, type of care or particular condition. They are an essential part of a service model and practice in an integrated manner within the multidisciplinary team, to deliver safe, effective, clinical evidence-based, efficient high quality patient care.

The degree of autonomy exercised in using extended skills, and the level of practice demonstrated across the 4 pillars relates to level of practice. Table 5 below provides an outline of the 4 pillars. The RCN has defined the levels of practice as:

- Enhanced level of practice describes a level that can only be delivered by registered nurses who have gained additional post-registration education and experiential learning in a relevant subject area. [rcn.org.uk/Professional-Development/Levels-of-nursing/Enhanced](https://www.rcn.org.uk/Professional-Development/Levels-of-nursing/Enhanced)
- Advanced level nursing is a level delivered by registered nurses with substantial experience and expertise. [rcn.org.uk/Professional-Development/Levels-of-nursing/Advanced](https://www.rcn.org.uk/Professional-Development/Levels-of-nursing/Advanced)

- Consultant level nursing describes a level which can only be delivered by registered nurses who have progressed from an advanced level within their field to reach a significantly higher level. [rcn.org.uk/Professional-Development/Levels-of-nursing/Consultant](https://www.rcn.org.uk/Professional-Development/Levels-of-nursing/Consultant)

Table 5: The 4 pillars for advanced level nursing

<p>Clinical The clinical pillar includes the knowledge, skills, and behaviours and nursing proficiencies needed to ensure high quality care is provided that is safe, effective and person-centred.</p>	<p>Research The research pillar includes the knowledge, skills, and behaviours and nursing proficiencies needed to lead and deliver research, as well as source and use high-quality evidence to inform practice, education activities and improve services.</p>
<p>Education The education pillar includes the knowledge, skills, and behaviours and nursing proficiencies needed to enable reflective practice, on-going self-development and effective learning in the workplace.</p>	<p>Leadership The leadership pillar includes the knowledge, skills, and behaviours and nursing proficiencies needed to work effectively in a team, lead in the manner appropriate to their level within the career framework and fulfil management responsibilities (if applicable).</p>

Advanced level practice: clinical skills and knowledge

Clinical practice is the key to creating a specialist arena of nursing practice. Some elements will be developed from entering fertility care, whilst others are attained after experience and specialist education to demonstrate competence and confidence. Overall, an advanced level nurse should:

- act as an expert nursing resource in their area of professional practice, including utilisation of clinical expertise
- role model high levels of nursing professionalism to people in the organisation and wider networks
- systematically apply an indepth understanding of health and care policy, systems and structures, implications of changing population needs and the political, social, economic, legal, technical, and professional context of health care and proactively work to address issues that they encounter
- apply knowledge and skills to a broad range of professionally challenging unpredictable, complex situations, within and across teams
- critically analyse and synthesise complex problems across a range of areas, enabling innovative creative solutions to improve outcomes and enhance people's experiences

- constantly work, directly or indirectly, to improve the quality of services and care provided for people and/or populations
- promote service-user and public involvement to enhance care for people, populations, and service delivery
- provide direct advice to individuals and interprofessional teams in a wide range of situations
- contribute to the understanding of the impact of practice on global and/or planetary health by promoting and adopting environmental-friendly and sustainable approaches
- be proficient in use of digital technologies applicable in the workplace.
- step into challenging situations, prioritising people using a values-based approach
- systematically applies an advanced awareness of professional and ethical values and the NMC Code to personal and strategic decisions, actions, responsibilities, outcomes, and dilemmas, whilst working with others to suggest appropriate solutions in unpredictably complex contexts
- advocate for people, services, and nursing.

Table 5 above outlines key elements for all nurses, and especially for those intending to advance their practice. **Section 3** below has expanded on key skills for advanced practice in delivering effective safe fertility nursing care.

Table 6: Knowledge and skills recommended for developing practice

- Reproductive anatomy and physiology both male and female
- Menstruation [rcn.org.uk/Professional-Development/publications/promoting-menstrual-wellbeing-uk-pub-010-375](https://www.rcn.org.uk/Professional-Development/publications/promoting-menstrual-wellbeing-uk-pub-010-375)
- Investigations required to assess fertility [rcn.org.uk/clinical-topics/Womens-health/Fertility-care-and-fertility-nursing](https://www.rcn.org.uk/clinical-topics/Womens-health/Fertility-care-and-fertility-nursing) (see fertility care blood tests and investigations)
- Preconception care
- Ultrasound scanning for fertility care [rcn.org.uk/Professional-Development/publications/rcn-nurses-performing-ultrasound-scanning-in-fertility-care-uk-pub-011-259](https://www.rcn.org.uk/Professional-Development/publications/rcn-nurses-performing-ultrasound-scanning-in-fertility-care-uk-pub-011-259)
- Early pregnancy issues and loss [rcn.org.uk/Professional-Development/publications/rcn-clinical-nurse-specialist-in-early-pregnancy-care-uk-pub-011-652](https://www.rcn.org.uk/Professional-Development/publications/rcn-clinical-nurse-specialist-in-early-pregnancy-care-uk-pub-011-652)
- Contraception and sexual health [fsrh.org](https://www.fsrh.org) and [bashh.org/resources/guidelines](https://www.bashh.org/resources/guidelines)
- Cervical screening programme [rcn.org.uk/Professional-Development/publications/rcn-cervical-screening-uk-pub-011-051](https://www.rcn.org.uk/Professional-Development/publications/rcn-cervical-screening-uk-pub-011-051)
- Fertility issues for both male and female
- Understanding of male fertility and sperm health [rcn.org.uk/Professional-Development/publications/rcn-male-factor-fertility-uk-pub-011-233](https://www.rcn.org.uk/Professional-Development/publications/rcn-male-factor-fertility-uk-pub-011-233)
- Gynaecology and Endocrine Conditions such as Polycystic ovary syndrome, and premature ovarian failure [rcn.org.uk/Professional-Development/publications/womens-health-pocket-guide-uk-pub-010-898](https://www.rcn.org.uk/Professional-Development/publications/womens-health-pocket-guide-uk-pub-010-898) and [rcn.org.uk/professional-development/publications/making-sense-of-womens-health-uk-pub-010-002](https://www.rcn.org.uk/professional-development/publications/making-sense-of-womens-health-uk-pub-010-002)
- Inclusion and diversity, inclusion care for Trans, non-binary, same sex couples and intersex individuals [rcn.org.uk/clinical-topics/Womens-health/Fertility-care-and-fertility-nursing/Inclusion-and-Diversity-in-Fertility-Nursing](https://www.rcn.org.uk/clinical-topics/Womens-health/Fertility-care-and-fertility-nursing/Inclusion-and-Diversity-in-Fertility-Nursing)
- Safeguarding including female genital mutilation, domestic abuse, modern slavery and trafficking
- Understanding the transition from fertility to maternity care [rcn.org.uk/Professional-Development/publications/transition-fertility-maternity-care-uk-pub-010-338](https://www.rcn.org.uk/Professional-Development/publications/transition-fertility-maternity-care-uk-pub-010-338)
- Understanding the emotional challenges of fertility issues and/or treatment [rcn.org.uk/Professional-Development/publications/fertility-care-and-emotional-wellbeing-uk-pub-011-054](https://www.rcn.org.uk/Professional-Development/publications/fertility-care-and-emotional-wellbeing-uk-pub-011-054)
- Fertility preservation [rcn.org.uk/Professional-Development/publications/rcn-fertility-preservation-uk-pub-011-754](https://www.rcn.org.uk/Professional-Development/publications/rcn-fertility-preservation-uk-pub-011-754)
- Fertility treatments, process and pathways
- Medicines management [rcn.org.uk/library/Subject-Guides/medicines-management](https://www.rcn.org.uk/library/Subject-Guides/medicines-management)
- Legal parenthood [hfea.gov.uk/treatments/explore-all-treatments/becoming-the-legal-parents-of-your-child](https://www.hfea.gov.uk/treatments/explore-all-treatments/becoming-the-legal-parents-of-your-child)
- Donation [hfea.gov.uk/donation](https://www.hfea.gov.uk/donation)
- Surrogacy [hfea.gov.uk/treatments/explore-all-treatments/surrogacy](https://www.hfea.gov.uk/treatments/explore-all-treatments/surrogacy)
- UK fertility law and regulation [hfea.gov.uk](https://www.hfea.gov.uk)

Advanced level practice: education

There is currently no one educational pathway to support development in all areas of advanced practice in fertility nursing, and consequently it can be complex to understand the differences in the roles from an academic viewpoint. Advanced practice stems from nurses' development of themselves and is always underpinned by nursing education and critical thinking.

It is generally recognised that education for advanced practice and critical thinking should be at master's level, and investment in nurses, to enhance their practice is critically important for women and for professional development, both individually and in support of better health care provision. The RCN (2024b) suggest it should include:

- demonstrate critical self-awareness, identifying their own personal development needs and take effective action to address them using a range of strategies including peer review
- share knowledge, experience and expertise with nurses and others at all levels, through strategies such as formal and informal teaching, facilitated reflective practice, skills supervision, coaching, mentoring and preceptorship
- act as a role model for advanced level nursing
- assess the needs of learners, recognising the individual's motivation, self-efficacy, and preferred learning-style, to develop personalised action plans
- deploy a wide range of teaching and learning strategies and resources, to support the development of people, underpinned by a knowledge of adult education theories
- evaluate the outcomes of teaching and learning activities and learner experience and adapt approaches accordingly
- design and develop projects and/or activities to strategically enhance others learning, work or practice within unpredictably complex contexts
- take responsibility for leading the systematic and critical evaluation of own and others' capabilities, performance, and development, applying strategic approaches and liaising with senior managers
- advocate for an organisational culture that supports continuous learning and development of the workforce, with effective succession planning
- where applicable, engage with higher education providers to support curriculum design, development, and delivery
- contribute to wider recognition of their area by publicising and disseminating significant achievements across the organisation and local/national audiences
- participate in the supervision, evaluation and assessment of nurses aspiring to work at an advanced level.

Demonstrating learning at master's level/advance practice is also important for career development. There are processes available for those who may not have the opportunity to complete a full programme at this academic level, which includes demonstrating and recognising former learning from experience such as recognition of prior learning.

Recognition of prior learning (RPL)

Many students enter higher education with valuable knowledge and skills developed through a range of professional contexts. Both formal study (certificated) and informal learning (via work experience) may be accredited for either entry to a programme of study or to gain exemption from parts of the programme.

It is important to stress that credit is not given for experience alone but rather for the learning gained through that experience. To receive recognition of prior learning, evidence must be provided of prior achievements, which are formally mapped and assessed against the course learning outcomes. This process enables an academic judgement to be made for the amount of credit that can be granted, or for course enrolment without the formal entry requirements. In making this assessment, universities are assured that all students receiving an award have demonstrated achievement of the course requirements through studying the course in full or using some of their previous experience or qualifications. Those wishing to claim recognition of prior learning should contact their local university admissions office. Further information is available at: qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/quality-code/making-use-of-credit.pdf

Developing practice through education

- Playing a key part in educating junior colleagues and the wider team.
- Contributing to the training pathways of peers and junior and multi-professional colleagues.
- Being involved in the education of nursing colleagues, doctors, GPs, practice nurses and the wider MDT.
- The RCN *Education and Career Progression Framework for Fertility Nursing*, can be found at: rcn.org.uk/Professional-Development/publications/rcn-education-and-career-progression-framework-for-fertility-nursing-uk-pub-011-692

Advanced level practice: research

The nursing profession has an obligation to strengthen the research culture and support evidence-based nursing practice, to optimise the health and wellbeing of all.

The RCN (2024b) identifies key elements of the reach pillar as:

- effectiveness, impact, and value of their own and others work
- use, and enable others to use, a wide range of contemporary high-quality data, research, evidence-based professional practice, and valid and reliable tools and techniques, to proactively evaluate and sustainably improve current ways of working
- critically appraise and synthesise the information from a variety of sources such as outcomes of relevant research, quality improvement projects, evaluations, and audits
- select and adapt appropriate problem-solving strategies, methods, and techniques to design systematic investigations that define and critically evaluate problems, using specialist information and data in unpredictable and complex contexts
- use a range of strategies and techniques for knowledge mobilisation and dissemination of research findings

- contribute to and undertake activities, including research, that monitor and improve the quality of services provided by an organisation, taking immediate action when standards are not met
- propose and enact evidence-based changes to practices or procedures which impact beyond one's own work area
- source advice on research governance processes to ensure compliance.

Whilst advanced level nurses are uniquely positioned to actively participate in and contribute to the professional body of knowledge in their field of advanced practice, some continue to feel reluctant or uncertain about how to initiate or negotiate their involvement (Fielding et al., 2022). Although limited time and resources may be a perceived barrier to motivate and support research activity, opportunities exist to enable advanced level nurses to become research active whilst meeting the competing demands of their clinical role.

Integrating research into clinical practice can include:

- keeping abreast of the developing literature within fertility care, in particular peer-reviewed research publications and disseminate findings to inform and underpin the team's practice
- gaining confidence in evaluating the quality of published research, and interpreting results to work out what applies to your clinical practice
- understanding different research methodologies, their strengths and weaknesses, to be able to identify biases in research conduct and reporting
- contributing to local and national professional forums
- disseminating evidence-based practice findings through local and national networks and conferences
- identifying an issue of clinical relevance from practice experience/clinical observation that requires further research to strengthen evidence for best practice
- evaluating and audit own and others' clinical practice to highlight gaps in clinical practice and develop ideas for improving care and outcomes
- critically appraise the outcomes of audit and service evaluations
- attending annual scientific meeting/research conference in your specialism to be fully informed of innovations
- considering submitting abstracts/posters on innovations in practice
- seeking out 'in-house' research networking opportunities, for example, offering your assistance to collect data on established research projects
- liaising with other advanced level nurses to explore concerns or commonalities across practice disciplines to inform a co-creation research proposal to answer important practice questions
- conducting a structured literature review to identify innovative research questions or new ways of looking at a phenomenon of interest

- meeting the organisation's clinical research team to discuss opportunities to collaborate on research projects, offering your specialist knowledge in return for guidance from more experienced research staff
- contacting a higher education institute for their list of open research seminars/ events to enable you to network with local researchers
- discussing the possibility of a research mentor at your next appraisal.

Join the RCN's Research Society for information and resources on using and developing research to enhance practice: rcn.org.uk/Professional-Development/research-and-innovation

Advanced level: leadership and management

Nurses, regardless of their role or practice setting, embody qualities of both a leader and manager. Whilst managers and leaders may share similar traits, they have distinct roles that emphasise and utilise leadership in different capacities.

Nurse managers are responsible for ensuring that specific health care settings function smoothly, providing a vital link between an organisation's vision and patient care. Acting as a valuable resource for advice and information, overseeing service delivery, supervising staff schedules, reviewing employee performance and professional development, budgeting, and improving health care operational quality.

Nurse leaders are responsible for advancing the organisation's vision and strategic long-term plans. They act as role models to inspire and influence others, ensure regulatory compliance, oversee quality measures, develop and implement new standards, and lead organisational change.

The most influential factor in shaping and driving organisational culture is leadership. Providing compassionate, authentic, and collaborative leadership greatly impacts team cohesion, people's sense of belonging, and may increase job satisfaction and retention, which in turn, influences care delivery. Organisations need the important contribution of nurses committed to working at advanced level practice, to provide leadership in clinical expertise, quality improvement efforts to optimise patient outcomes, and professional advancement of nursing staff. This must be negotiated within legal, ethical, professional, organisational policies, governance arrangements, and the financial challenges now facing the health care system.

The RCN (2024b) suggest that leaders should:

- demonstrate individual leadership via self-awareness, dynamism, self-motivation and adaptivity in own leadership style to optimise results
- display self-leadership by prioritising own workload and actions at times of competing demands
- make challenging decisions, taking responsibility for outcomes in unpredictably complex contexts
- demonstrate tactical leadership by working collaboratively with a broad range of people within and across an organisation and of external stakeholders and agencies

- apply advanced interpersonal, team and networking skills to enhance team performance
- use a range of negotiating and influencing skills to develop and improve on current ways of working and optimise outcomes and support a culture of safety
- demonstrate operational leadership including leading individuals, teams and/or different groups, they may or may not manage
- translate strategic decisions into operational practice
- systematically synthesise advanced and specialist information and ideas and formulate and develop innovative proposals to address strategic issues or opportunities in unpredictably complex contexts
- demonstrate leadership and innovation in work contexts that are challenging, unfamiliar, complex, and unpredictable and that require solving problems involving many interacting factors
- participate in local and regional networks and respond to local, regional and national developments
- develop robust governance systems by contributing to the development and implementation of evidence-based policies, processes, and standards
- ensure that national, and where applicable international standards, are applied as a minimum
- formulate plans and manage projects that translate strategy into action and evaluate change, outcomes, and impact
- work across professional, service, organisational, agency and system boundaries
- use financial acumen in developing appropriate strategies that enhance quality, productivity, and value
- proactively facilitate development of leadership skills in others within and across the organisation
- demonstrate strategic leadership by supporting the creation and development of environments, systems, and cultures that in current approaches are continuously reviewed and improved
- deploy strategic competence by having the skill to decide when or when not to act
- horizon scan for opportunities across disciplines and organisations, seize and facilitate the creation of momentum to optimise effective and sustainable change
- lead innovation and service development utilising evidence-based approaches for quality improvement
- develop and sustain productive relationships and partnerships with a broad range of stakeholders, locally and regionally, to influence the strategic direction of organisational provision and outcomes for the benefit of people and/or populations.

The NHS Leadership Academy developed the *Healthcare Leadership Model* (leadershipacademy.nhs.uk/healthcare-leadership-model), to enable nurses to become better leaders in their day-to-day roles. The model comprises 9 leadership dimensions, with each dimension shown on a 4-part scale, ranging from 'essential' through to

‘proficient’, ‘strong’ and ‘exemplary’. This can help advanced level nurses to understand their leadership development needs.

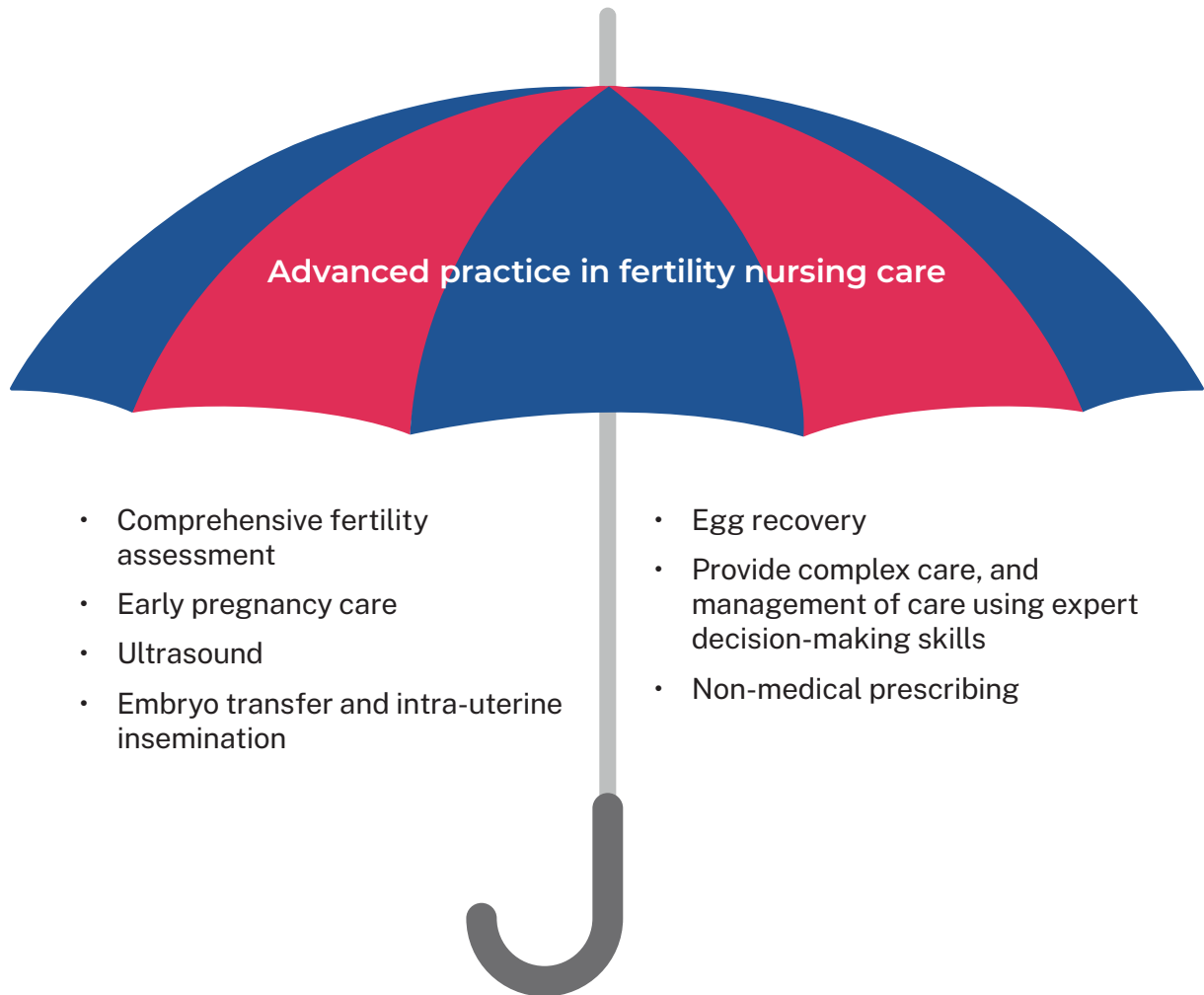
1. Inspiring shared purpose
2. Leading with care
3. Evaluating information
4. Connecting our service
5. Sharing the vision
6. Engaging the team
7. Holding to account
8. Developing capability
9. Influencing for results

The 9 dimensions contain a description of what it is and why it is important. There are a series of questions to guide peoples’ thoughts and result in effective leadership behaviour. The questions can also help nurses to explore intentions, motivations, and strengths, as well as areas for development.

Progressing leadership skills may include:

- advocating for those accessing fertility care locally, and on a wider scale within service
- working autonomously as a clinical leader and within the service and MDTs
- contributing to policies, procedures, development, and care pathways within service, particularly with reference to complex cases
- being aware of and contributing to ensuring service is cost effective and efficient
- ensuring service change is patient led, eg, look at patient feedback, perform audits
- being responsible for your own learning and acting as a positive role model for others, and be open to colleague feedback
- perform clinical supervision for junior colleagues and ensure own clinical supervision needs are met
- perform advanced practice peer audit as needed
- knowledge of local pathways for referral ie, fertility referral pathways, termination of pregnancy referrals, termination of pregnancy following diagnosis of fetal abnormality, miscarriage pathways
- knowledge of local/national resources
- knowledge of age of consent/domestic abuse/modern slavery/mandatory reporting and local safeguarding pathways.

3. Clinical practice for advanced level fertility nursing



* There are a wide range of skills bespoke to fertility care, the following have been considered as advanced practice skills, however some skills may be specialist/enhanced or advanced level, dependent on the area of practice, but would not be considered essential to be an advanced nurse practitioner as defined above. These could include 'conscious patient sedation', or creating modern families, in surrogacy arrangements, donation and supporting transgender fertility care.

Advanced level practice in fertility care

An advanced level nurse in fertility care must be able to autonomously manage the patient journey from referral to the end of each, individual or couples’ journey and ensure follow up care is provided to enable them to cope with the creation of a family using technology/donation/genetic screening or in some cases childlessness with a focus on advanced and/or complex areas of care. The range of clinical skills are variable and those listed here are just some examples.

- Work autonomously, using a person-centred approach within the expanded scope of practice.
- Undertake comprehensive health assessment with differential diagnosis and will diagnose.
- Prescribe care and treatment, or appropriately refer and/or discharge patients/clients.
- Provide complex care, and management of care using expert decision-making skills.
- Act as an educator, leader, innovator and contributor to research. (RCN 2024)

Conduct comprehensive fertility assessment: perform and interpret diagnostic tests, analyse diagnostic results and formulate individualised care, perform advanced diagnostic techniques, communicate diagnostic findings clearly with patients and their partners and apply ethical guidelines and principles in collecting, interpreting and sharing fertility related information.

Clinical skills	Education available
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Patient and partner history taking. • Physical examination. • Comprehensive fertility assessment. • Psychological assessment of individuals and couples. • Diagnostic assessment – hormonal, ultrasonography, semen analysis, ovulation tracking. • Specialised techniques: tubal evaluation assessment and interpretation of results. • Genetic and chromosomal testing. • Collaborative approach involving patients in treatment decisions. • Ethical considerations involving diagnostic testing. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is currently limited access to specialised fertility advanced level master’s programmes, therefore it may be necessary to seek and undertake a generic advanced clinical practitioner master’s, where modules can be used to meet the requirements for fertility care. For example a postgraduate diploma in sexual and reproductive medicine. • RCN <i>Education and Career Progression Framework for Fertility Nursing</i> rcn.org.uk/Professional-Development/publications/rcn-education-and-career-progression-framework-for-fertility-nursing-uk-pub-011-692 • ESHRE Certification for nurses eshre.eu/Accreditation-and-Certification/Nurses-Midwives-Certification.aspx • Prescribing course. • Portfolio work to demonstrate competence and confidence in own practice, validated by peers/senior experts.

Advanced practice in early pregnancy care: able to analyse images, assess the uterine lining, and identify normal anatomy and fetal development and to recognise anomalies. They also need to be able to advise on blood tests and medications and communicate their findings to patients and other health care professionals. They also need to be able to signpost to other professional organisations that can support patients, partners and their families.

Clinical skills	Education available
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Counselling and discussion of options. • First and second trimester scanning. • Performing and interpreting investigations and results. • Perform speculum and bimanual examinations. • Non-medical prescribing. • Assessing and managing pain and bleeding in early pregnancy. • Medical management of ectopic pregnancy. • Diagnosis and management of molar pregnancy, referring onto specialist services as needed. • Miscarriage management. • Enhanced safeguarding and care for socially complex or vulnerable women. • Bereavement support following pregnancy loss. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Association of Early Pregnancy units (AEPU) aepu.org.uk • USS qualification: The RCN recommends a postgraduate certificate in ultrasound, which should be accredited by the Consortium for the Accreditation of Sonographic Education (CASE). rcn.org.uk/Professional-Development/publications/rcn-nurses-performing-ultrasound-scanning-in-fertility-care-uk-pub-011-259 • Enhanced safeguarding modules • Counselling skills, for example bica.net

Ultrasound scanning: Ultrasound is a complex advanced skill, the RCN is referring to enhanced clinical expertise, ability to analyse and synthesise information, and being responsible for clinical governance. This includes reporting findings, which should not be separated from scanning. Nurses who are engaged in ultrasound scanning in fertility care may be involved in a range of different types of ultrasound scanning activities.

Clinical skills	Education available
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Diagnostic scans. • Initial baseline/assessment. • Follicle tracking scan – natural cycle. • Follicle tracking scan – medicated. • Follicle tracking scan -during Intrauterine. insemination (IUI)/donor intrauterine insemination (DIUI) treatment. • Down regulation scan. • Treatment baseline scan. • IVF/ICSI stimulation scan. • FET/FER treatment cycle scan. • Embryo transfer trans abdominal scan. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Royal College of Nursing (2024) <i>Ultrasound Guidelines for Nurses Performing Ultrasound Scanning in Fertility Care</i> rcn.org.uk/professional-development/publications/rcn-nurses-performing-ultrasound-scanning-in-fertility-care-uk-pub-011-259 • Ultrasound for Assisted Reproduction, Birmingham University bcu.ac.uk/courses/medical-ultrasound-msc-2025-26 • Graduate Certificate in Fertility Ultrasound, University College Dublin ucd.ie/medicine/studywithus/graduate/radiographydiagnosticimaging/ultrasoundprogrammes/graduatecertificateinfertilityultrasound • Certificate in Negotiated Specialist Ultrasound Gynaecology Ultrasound & Ultrasound in Early Pregnancy, University of Derby derby.ac.uk/short-courses-cpd/health-and-social-care/ultrasound-in-early-pregnancy-assessment

Embryo transfer and intra-uterine insemination: must be able to explain to the patient (and partner, where relevant) and work with laboratory staff to ensure the embryos/sperm used is optimum. Communication is key as is documentation, medication, ultrasound, counselling and clinical skills. The nurse should have the clinical expertise to undertake the task and the ability, knowledge and skills to ensure the outcomes meet the national average success rates as indicated on the HFEA website. Continuous assessment of outcomes is required with regular audit and peer review within the centre.

Clinical skills	Education available
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrate expert knowledge of embryonic and endometrial development in relation to optimum time in IVF cycle for ET. • Demonstrate knowledge of complex, diseased pelvic anatomy in relation to ET/IUI procedure. • Undertake trans-abdominal ultrasound in relation to normal and difficult cannulation. • Undertake manipulation of catheter through convoluted canal without supervision. • Use in-depth knowledge to manage potential and actual complications during the procedure. • Provide expert advice and support for staff in relation to ET/IUI procedures and in accordance with up-to-date evidence-based practice. • Ensure that training needs are assessed and met, through audit and best practice. • Initiate research and audit in relation to best practice for ET/IUI. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clinical Embryology and Assisted Reproduction Technology PG Dip (Leeds) courses.leeds.ac.uk/g635/clinical-embryology-and-assisted-reproduction-technology-pgdip#:~:text=Course%20overview,the%20potential%20to%20transform%20lives • Graduates in biology, biomedical science, biochemistry, and medical or nursing disciplines. • British Fertility Society britishfertilitysociety.org.uk • Embryo Transfer and IUI module britishfertilitysociety.org.uk/education-training/bfs-certification-modules

Egg recovery: must be able to explain to the patient (and partner, where relevant) and work with laboratory staff to ensure the embryos used is optimum. Communication is key as is documentation, medication, ultrasound, counselling and clinical skills. The nurse should have the clinical expertise to undertake the task and the ability, knowledge and skills to ensure the outcomes meet the national average success rates as indicated on the HFEA website. Continuous assessment of outcomes is required with regular audit and peer review within the centre.

Clinical skills	Education available
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proficiency in transvaginal ultrasound: ability to use ultrasound to visualise and accurately locate ovarian follicles. • Aseptic technique: ensuring sterility throughout the procedure to prevent infection. • Needle aspiration skills: skilled in guiding and inserting the needle through the vaginal wall into each follicle for egg retrieval. • Anaesthesia administration and monitoring: knowledge of sedation or anaesthesia protocols, and the ability to monitor the patient's vital signs throughout the procedure. • Specimen handling and transfer: ability to handle, label, and transfer follicular fluid samples to the embryologist promptly and safely. • Pain management and post-procedure care: providing pain management, assessing for complications such as bleeding or infection, and delivering aftercare instructions to support recovery. • Patient communication and emotional support: offering clear explanations, addressing concerns, and providing reassurance to help patients manage anxiety associated with the procedure. • Use indepth knowledge to manage potential and actual complications during the procedure. • Provide expert advice and support for staff in relation to egg collection procedures and in accordance with up-to-date evidence-based practice. • Ensure that training needs are assessed and met, through audit and best practice. • Initiate research and audit in relation to best practice for egg collection. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RCOG/BFS Subfertility and Assisted Conception Course – annually at RCOG.

<p>Provide complex care, and management of care using expert decision-making skills: advanced level fertility nursing involves delivering comprehensive care that addresses multifaceted patient needs, making informed, evidence-based decisions to optimise treatment outcomes, and coordinating effectively across multidisciplinary teams to ensure continuity and quality of care.</p>	
Clinical skills	Education available
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clinical expertise and critical thinking. • Diagnosis skills. • Management skills. • Clinical decision making. • Management of specific pathways, for example – IUI, DIUI, treatment options. 	<p>There is currently limited access to specialised fertility advanced level master’s programmes, therefore it may be necessary to seek and undertake a generic advanced clinical practitioner master’s, where modules can be used to meet the requirements for fertility care.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • BFS – Challenges in managing a successful fertility service – annual course britishfertilitysociety.org.uk/education-training/bfs-certification-modules • The RCOG Guide for Special Interest Training Module: Management of Subfertility provides an overview of medical staff training to become sub specialists in reproductive health. This document could be used to create a training package for ANP in fertility. rcog.org.uk/media/2pknikgy/management-of-subfertility-sitm-2024-guide.pdf

Non-medical prescribing (NMP) is a valuable advanced-level skill in fertility care, enabling nurses to prescribe medications within their scope of practice. Non-medical prescribing enhances the efficiency and effectiveness of fertility services, empowering advanced practitioners to deliver comprehensive, patient-centered care.

Clinical skills	Education available
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Patient assessment and consultation skills. History taking, clinical examination, risk assessment and patient communication ensuring clear explanations about purpose, risks and benefits of prescribed medications. • Diagnostic and decision-making skills. The ability to use clinical judgment and clinical evidence to interpret diagnostic tests in order to formulate a diagnosis and prescribe medication. • Pharmacological knowledge. Understanding how fertility medications work, calculating and titrating dosages, recognising side effects and identifying possible drug interactions. • Legal and ethical prescribing. Adhering to legal frameworks, ensuring patients fully understand their treatment medications and document prescribing decisions and rationale. • Monitoring and follow up skills. Monitoring treatment effectiveness, adjusting doses and providing guidance on medication use and next steps. • Critical thinking and evidence-based practice. Staying updated on the latest fertility medication guidelines, balancing clinical evidence with patients preferences and addressing complex fertility cases. 	<p>Prescribing Competency Framework rpharms.com/resources/frameworks/prescribing-competency-framework/competency-framework</p>

4. Conclusion

Postgraduate education, knowledge, leadership and management skills, as well as active participation in clinical roles and knowledge translation are crucial ingredients for promotion of nursing graduates to advanced practice roles (Chan et al., 2022). However, in contrast to other specialities, developing practice as an advanced level nurse in fertility care can be complex, with no direct pathway. Therefore, thinking strategically about career direction and looking at the role requirements is an important first step, as is ensuring that education is at master's level.

The key points around working at an advanced level include:

- advanced knowledge and clinical skills
- accountable practitioners working at the boundaries of the profession
- innovative practice, using a clear evidence base
- skilled at assessing and managing risks
- freedom and authority to act and takes responsibility for decisions and actions made
- experienced in fertility nursing care with master level thinking and relevant courses for development
- providing holistic assessment
- look at the whole person through different healthcare models from health promotion, caring, counselling, assessment, diagnosis, referral, treatments, and discharge
- enhance the solutions to workforce challenges.

Fertility nursing offers opportunities for advanced practice roles, and those nurses wishing to enhance their practice and advance their careers in this specialist area of practice will need the initial requirements outlined above and then may choose a sub speciality for the different roles.

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RCN quality assurance

Publication

This is an RCN practice guidance. Practice guidance are evidence-based consensus documents, used to guide decisions about appropriate care of an individual, family or population in a specific context.

Description

This competency document is intended to support best practice across the fertility nursing sector, by articulating key skills required to be an advanced level practitioner. It is intended to support career development in fertility care, both for individual nurses, nurse managers and service providers.

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The Nine Quality Standards

This publication has met the nine quality standards of the quality framework for RCN professional publications. For more information, or to request further details on how the nine quality standards have been met in relation to this particular professional publication, please contact publications.feedback@rcn.org.uk

Evaluation

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