

**SPECIALIST BREAST NURSE  
COMPETENCY STANDARDS**

AND ASSOCIATED  
EDUCATIONAL REQUIREMENTS

**JULY 2005**

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

**This report is a summary of the full report**

*Specialist Breast Nurse Competency Standards and Associated Educational Requirements*

**To access a copy of the full report go to [www.nbcc.org.au](http://www.nbcc.org.au) or call 1800 624 973**

This report was produced by:

**The National Breast Cancer Centre:**

**92 Parramatta Road Camperdown NSW 2050 Australia**

**Locked Bag 16 Camperdown NSW 1450 Australia**

**Telephone: +61 2 9036 3030**

**Facsimile: +61 2 9036 3077**

**Website: [www.nbcc.org.au](http://www.nbcc.org.au)**

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Website: [www.nbcc.org.au](http://www.nbcc.org.au)

Email: [director@nbcc.org.au](mailto:director@nbcc.org.au)

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## **NBCC SPECIALIST BREAST NURSE STEERING COMMITTEE**

Professor Patsy Yates (Chair)	Ms Marian Plunkett-Wong
Ms Gina Akers	Ms Maureen Ramsden
Ms Kate Cameron	Mr Andrew Spillane
Ms Elise Davies	Ms Kathleen Swift
Ms Fiona Farmer	Ms Belinda Thewes
Ms Deb Hill	Professor Kate White
Dr Rosemary Knight	Dr Pam Williams
Ms Meg Lewis	

## **NBCC EXPERT WORKING GROUP**

Professor Patsy Yates (Chair)	Professor Kate White
Ms Meg Lewis	Professor Sanchia Aranda

## **CONSULTANTS**

The NBCC gratefully acknowledges the work undertaken by Dr Marie Heartfield and Ms Terri Gibson from the Division of Health Sciences, University of South Australia in conducting the initial phases of this project.

## **NATIONAL BREAST CANCER CENTRE STAFF**

Dr Nicole Rankin	Dr Karen Luxford
Ms Danielle Campbell	Ms Katherine Vaughan
Mr Andy Moore	Dr Alison Evans

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In recent years, support for the role of the Specialist Breast Nurse (SBN) in the management of women with breast cancer in Australia has grown, as a result of evidence of the benefits of this role from studies both within Australia and overseas. SBNs provide valuable support and care coordination for women with breast cancer across the continuum of care. However, a recent study has identified significant variation in how the role functions across individual nurses and settings. Such variation is likely to contribute to varied outcomes for women with breast cancer.

This project was initiated by the National Breast Cancer Centre (NBCC) with the aim of defining a set of SBN Competency Standards considered integral to optimising outcomes for women with breast cancer. These Standards have been designed to be inclusive of and complementary to existing nursing competency standards and contemporary breast cancer care. The project has also identified recommendations for ensuring that the educational and training requirements for SBNs in Australia are addressed adequately.

## PROJECT DESIGN

The project was conducted over five main phases:

- **Phase 1 & 2:** Focused review of Australian and international literature and drafting of the key role areas and broad competency domains for SBNs in Australia
- **Phase 3:** Stakeholder consultation and development of draft SBN Competency Standards and educational requirements
- **Phase 4:** Synthesis of data sources and refinement of SBN Competency Standards and educational requirements
- **Phase 5:** Review of educational programs and development of recommendations for SBN education.

The project methodology involved synthesis of multiple sources of evidence and resulted in a set of SBN Competency Standards that are based on the evidence whilst reflecting the views of major stakeholders. The validity and credibility of these standards will only be established through the application to practice by members of the profession.

## ADVANCED NURSING PRACTICE AND SPECIALIST NURSING PRACTICE

A number of studies, both in Australia and overseas, have attempted to define and clarify how specialist and advanced levels of practice are conceptualised in the nursing profession. Based on a number of conceptual definitions of specialist practice, an SBN can be seen as requiring an advanced level of competence in those areas of practice specific to meeting the health needs of women with breast cancer, such as patient education and management of issues associated with cancer and its treatment. For the purposes of this project, it has been assumed that individuals undertaking an SBN role will already be at an advanced level of nursing practice.

## COMPETENCY STANDARDS IN NURSING

Competency standards have been developed by the Australian nursing profession as a response to issues of role diversity and lack of clarity in defining scope and levels of practice. Competency standards recommend expected levels of knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviours. Their use in

nursing has been debated. However, without a superior alternative, nurse regulatory authorities and professional bodies continue to benchmark safe practice in this way.

The literature on specialist and advanced nursing practice suggests that there is considerable disparity in definition and terms, practice criteria and educational requirements for specialist and advanced nursing practitioners. After consideration of issues raised in the literature on competency standards for advanced and specialist nursing practice, the development of the SBN Competency Standards was guided by the following principles:

- the SBN Competency Standards are designed to be used in conjunction with the Australian Nursing and Midwifery Council (ANMC) *National Competency Standards for the Registered Nurse and the Enrolled Nurse* – these serve as a foundation and are therefore not repeated in the SBN Competency Standards
- the SBN Competency Standards are designed to complement the Australian Nursing Federation (ANF) *Competency Standards for the Advanced Practice Nurse* – the SBN role is an advanced nursing role and as such the ANF Competency Standards are considered a foundation and are not repeated in the SBN Competency Standards
- the SBN Competency Standards recognise that specialist practice requires advanced knowledge and skills in the field of breast cancer nursing and as such, the Competency Standards described are considered the minimum required to undertake this role
- the SBN Competency Standards have been formatted to reflect the style of the ANMC Standards, and are presented according to domains of practice; each domain includes an overarching competency statement, elements of competence, and performance criteria that illustrate aspects of competent practice.

## **SBN COMPETENCY STANDARDS**

This NBCC report defines the SBN as *a registered nurse who applies advanced knowledge of the health needs, preferences and circumstances of women with breast cancer to optimise the individual's health and well-being at various phases across the continuum of care, including diagnosis, treatment, rehabilitation, follow-up and palliative care*. The report concludes that this advanced level of SBN knowledge and skills is reflected in five core domains of practice:

- Supportive care
- Collaborative care
- Coordinated care
- Information provision and education
- Clinical leadership.

The SBN Competency Standards have been developed around these five core domains. They are designed specifically for nurses whose practice incorporates an advanced level of knowledge and skill in the nursing care of women with breast cancer. They assume a model of care that enables the SBN to work collaboratively with women, other nurses and members of the health team to meet the multiple health needs of women with breast cancer across the continuum of care.

## **DOMAINS OF PRACTICE**

A description of the five domains of practice under which the SBN Competency Standards are presented is outlined below.

### ***Domain: Supportive Care***

This domain comprises Competency Standards that reflect the ability of the SBN to identify multiple physical, psychological, social, sexual and spiritual needs of clients throughout the continuum of breast cancer care, and to implement evidence-based supportive care interventions in a flexible and responsive manner, in the context of a collaborative multidisciplinary approach to care, to achieve optimal health outcomes for clients with breast cancer.

### ***Domain: Collaborative Care***

This domain comprises competencies reflecting the ability of the SBN to facilitate a collaborative approach to care planning, implementation and evaluation by ensuring the client and service providers are working effectively as a team and that those involved in a client's care have established secure and dependable relationships to meet client needs. These competencies include recognition of the critical interdependence between the SBN role and other nurses and health professionals involved in a woman's care.

### ***Domain: Coordinated Care***

This domain incorporates competencies reflecting the ability of the SBN to facilitate a coordinated approach to care planning, implementation and evaluation by ensuring a comprehensive range of health and support services needed are delivered in a timely, flexible and efficient manner in response to client needs.

### ***Domain: Information Provision and Education***

This domain incorporates competencies reflecting the ability of the SBN to provide comprehensive, specialised and individualised information to clients about the pathophysiology of breast cancer and its effects, treatment approaches, supportive care, and self-management strategies, using evidence-based educational strategies that are consistent with individual clinical circumstances, preferences, information and self-care needs.

### ***Domain: Clinical Leadership***

This domain contains competencies reflecting the ability of the SBN to advance and improve breast cancer care through a range of clinical leadership and professional activities.

## **EDUCATION AND TRAINING PROGRAMS FOR SBNs**

Specialist nursing education is well established in most university schools of nursing in Australia, with postgraduate qualifications now recognised in industrial agreements for nurses in a number of States. There is however no credentialing or accreditation system for specialty practice in nursing, except for specific skill areas such as midwifery or immunisation. Moreover, a nurse currently employed in an advanced role does not necessarily require a postgraduate qualification. The SBN Competency Standards provide a framework for determining educational requirements that will facilitate the development of nurses' competence to practice in this field.

While there are a variety of educational programs currently available in Australia for nurses who wish to learn about breast cancer nursing, this report identifies general agreement that SBNs require, as a minimum, a Graduate Diploma in order to develop the advanced level of competence required to perform the role. This level of education was seen as necessary for achieving the depth

and scope of knowledge and skills reflected in the SBN Competency Standards. The importance of maintaining currency of knowledge and skills was highlighted, as was the need for professional support mechanisms for SBNs.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

A number of recommendations have been identified from this project. These are outlined below.

### **1. Definition of an SBN:**

It is recommended:

- that the following definition be adopted as the standard definition for SBNs in Australia: *the SBN is a registered nurse who applies advanced knowledge of the health needs, preferences and circumstances of women with breast cancer to optimise the individual's health and well-being at various phases across the continuum of care, including diagnosis, treatment, rehabilitation, follow-up and palliative care.*

### **2. Uptake of SBN Competency Standards and Educational Requirements:**

It is recommended:

- that the SBN Competency Standards and associated educational requirements be formally adopted and implemented nationally by educational facilities, professional groups and health services
- that employers recognise the SBN role and are encouraged to incorporate the SBN Competency Standards in the development of role descriptions and performance evaluation
- that course providers be encouraged to incorporate the SBN Competency Standards in curriculum design, implementation and evaluation for SBNs.

### **3. Education and professional development of SBNs:**

It is recommended:

- that the minimum education level for SBNs be a Graduate Diploma in the specialty of cancer nursing (or equivalent)
- that curriculum design for SBN education programs reflect:
  - o content addressing the SBN Competency Standards
  - o learning and assessment approaches that enable the development of advanced competencies for SBNs, including both theoretical and clinical learning experiences and assessment
  - o flexible learning pathways that recognise prior learning while maintaining a commitment to ensuring SBN Competency Standards are achieved
- that evidence-based learning resources incorporating the SBN Competency Standards be developed to support students undertaking education programs in cancer nursing
- that professional organisations develop education programs relevant to the continuing professional development needs of SBNs
- that supervision models for SBNs be developed and support provided for their implementation.

### **4. Further evaluation:**

It is recommended:

- that the SBN Competency Standards be evaluated to determine their validity in practice
- that the applicability of the SBN Competency Standards and associated educational requirements be explored in relation to generalised 'specialist cancer nursing'.

# SPECIALIST BREAST NURSE COMPETENCY STANDARDS

## PURPOSE OF COMPETENCY STANDARDS

The SBN Competency Standards specify the performance required for nurses who practice as specialists in the field of breast cancer nursing.

The SBN Competency Standards have been developed to communicate the level of competency that can be expected of SBNs, and thereby:

- inform policy and procedure development
- assist the community's understanding of the purpose of an SBN
- provide a framework for curriculum development and evaluation, academic assessment, and workplace performance review
- provide guidance for health workforce planning.

It is expected that the use of the SBN Competency Standards will contribute to positive health outcomes of women with breast cancer by ensuring nurses are equipped and supported appropriately to provide safe and effective nursing care.<sup>6</sup>

## SBN ROLE STATEMENT

The SBN is a registered nurse who applies advanced knowledge of the health needs, preferences and circumstances of women with breast cancer to optimise the individual's health and well-being at various phases across the continuum of care, including diagnosis, treatment, rehabilitation, follow-up and palliative care. This advanced knowledge is based on an in-depth understanding of theory and research relevant to the field of breast cancer nursing. Specifically, SBN practice incorporates advanced knowledge and skills in supportive care, including providing specialised and tailored information and education, psychological support, and clinical care. The SBN adapts his/her practice according to the specific and changing needs of individual women, taking into account their multiple health needs, concerns and preferences for care. The SBN also facilitates effective interdisciplinary team functioning and continuity of care between different phases of the cancer journey, care settings, care plans and care providers. SBNs demonstrate leadership within the specialty of breast cancer nursing, by providing expert advice and support to other health professionals, through reflective practice, and by contributing to continuous improvement and the advancement of knowledge about care for women with breast cancer.

## SBN COMPETENCY STANDARDS

### **DOMAIN: SUPPORTIVE CARE**

This domain comprises competency standards that reflect the ability of the SBN to identify multiple physical, psychological, social, sexual and spiritual needs of clients throughout the continuum of breast cancer care, and to implement evidence-based supportive care interventions in a flexible and responsive manner, in the context of a collaborative multidisciplinary approach to care, to achieve optimal health outcomes for clients with breast cancer.

### **COMPETENCY STANDARD 1**

Engages in practice that demonstrates the application of advanced knowledge and skills about breast cancer and its impact to promote optimal physical and psychological, social, sexual, and spiritual outcomes for clients across the continuum of breast cancer care.

#### ***Competency Element 1.1***

Identifies, validates and prioritises potential and actual physical, psychological, social, sexual and spiritual health and support needs of clients across the continuum of breast cancer.

#### **Performance criteria**

- A. Demonstrates comprehensive and advanced knowledge and appreciation of the experience and impact of breast cancer and its treatment on the physical, psychological, social, sexual and spiritual well-being of clients and their family/significant others.
- B. Uses contemporary standards and guidelines to inform comprehensive and timely assessment of current and potential or unpredictable health problems and support needs across the continuum of breast cancer care.
- C. Routinely assesses all clients for psychosocial risk factors and distress at the time of diagnosis and on a regular basis using a systematic evidence-based approach.
- D. Communicates effectively with other members of the health team to facilitate efficient, timely and comprehensive assessment and identification of current and potential needs of clients with breast cancer and their family/significant others.
- E. Anticipates and responds to potential risks for clients associated with specific health care interventions and treatments related to management of breast cancer.

### **Competency Element 1.2**

Develops collaborative therapeutic relationships with clients and their families/significant others to anticipate and meet their multiple care needs across the continuum of breast cancer care.

#### **Performance criteria**

- A. Uses advanced and goal-directed communication skills to establish and maintain therapeutic relationships with clients and their family/significant others throughout the cancer journey.
- B. Actively explores client's preferences and decisions regarding care and treatment throughout the cancer journey, while ensuring the client has access to appropriate information on which to base decisions.\*
- C. Promotes client's ability to participate in care decisions and self-management of health needs, according to assessment of client's preferences and resources.
- D. Collaborates with the client in care planning and implementation to achieve therapeutic goals consistent with client's needs and decisions.

### **Competency Element 1.3**

Demonstrates a high level of proficiency in integrating contemporary knowledge and evidence about breast cancer and its impact to effectively provide a range of supportive care interventions to meet the multiple health needs of clients with breast cancer, in the context of a multidisciplinary approach to care.

#### **Performance criteria**

- A. Collaborates with clients, their family/significant others, and other nurses and members of the health team, in planning and implementing care to meet the multiple health and support needs of clients with breast cancer.
- B. Exhibits comprehensive and advanced knowledge of clinical and supportive care guidelines and interventions in the context of breast cancer.\*
- C. Demonstrates advanced skills in the use of therapeutic nursing interventions for meeting physical, psychological, social, sexual and spiritual needs of clients with breast cancer care.
- D. Consults and collaborates with other nurses and members of the health team and other health services to address physical, psychological, social, sexual and spiritual needs that are more complex, not within the scope of specialist breast nursing practice, or which are not able to be met with available resources.
- E. Adapts and prioritises practice guidelines and interventions according to cultural, spiritual and social contexts and clinical circumstances of individual clients with breast cancer.
- F. Continuously evaluates the client's condition and response to interventions in a timely manner and modifies the management plan when necessary to achieve optimal health outcomes for clients with breast cancer.\*

*\*Adapted from Nurse Practitioner Competency Standards*

## **DOMAIN: COLLABORATIVE CARE**

This domain comprises competencies reflecting the ability of the SBN to facilitate a collaborative approach to care planning, implementation and evaluation by ensuring the client and service providers are working effectively as a team and that those involved in a client's care have established secure and dependable relationships to meet client needs. These competencies include recognition of the critical interdependence between the SBN role and other nurses and health professionals involved in a woman's care.

### **COMPETENCY STANDARD 2**

Demonstrates advanced skills in facilitating a coordinated, collaborative, multidisciplinary approach to health assessment and care planning, implementation and evaluation to achieve optimal outcomes across the continuum of breast cancer care.

#### ***Competency Element 2.1***

Collaborates with the client receiving care, their family and/or significant others and other nurses and members of the health care team, to optimise health outcomes for clients with breast cancer.

#### **Performance criteria**

- A. Actively facilitates the involvement of the client as a partner in the multidisciplinary team.
- B. Articulates and promotes the role of the SBN in client care, in consultation with the client, and other members of the health care team, including other nursing colleagues involved in the client's care.
- C. Demonstrates a comprehensive understanding of the role of other nursing colleagues and members of the multidisciplinary team in achieving optimal outcomes for individual clients with breast cancer.
- D. Uses advanced communication strategies that promote exchange of information about care needs and positive multidisciplinary clinical partnerships in planning and implementing breast cancer care.
- E. Responds to and initiates referrals in collaboration with the health care team, according to the clinical needs and preferences of clients with breast cancer.
- F. Contributes as part of the multidisciplinary team to review of individual client's care outcomes and continuous improvement of breast cancer services.

## **DOMAIN: COORDINATED CARE**

This domain incorporates competencies reflecting the ability of the SBN to facilitate a coordinated approach to care planning, implementation and evaluation by ensuring a comprehensive range of health and support services needed are delivered in a timely, flexible and efficient manner in response to client needs.

### **COMPETENCY STANDARD 3**

Demonstrates advanced knowledge and skill in facilitating a coordinated and efficient approach to the delivery of health and support services and care interventions that are responsive to individual clinical and social circumstances across the continuum of breast cancer care.

### **Competency Element 3.1**

Coordinates implementation of the client's care across different phases of the cancer journey and across health care settings to facilitate continuity of care and effective use of health care resources relevant to the needs of clients with breast cancer

#### **Performance criteria**

- A. Develops, implements and continuously reviews a comprehensive care plan incorporating interventions to promote continuity of care.
- B. Ensures that clients and family/significant others have access to information and resources to enable continuity of their care and facilitate linkage between past to current and future care experiences.
- C. Promotes the efficient exchange of information between care providers, episodes of care, and health care settings, about the client's clinical, practical and support needs, preferences and care plans.
- D. Demonstrates a comprehensive knowledge of health services and community resources relevant to breast cancer care across the continuum.
- E. Liaises and collaborates with service providers in various care contexts to facilitate the delivery of services in a complementary, consistent and timely manner.

#### **DOMAIN: INFORMATION PROVISION AND EDUCATION**

This domain incorporates competencies reflecting the ability of the SBN to provide comprehensive, specialised and individualised information to clients about the pathophysiology of breast cancer and its effects, treatment approaches, supportive care, and self-management strategies, using evidence-based educational strategies that are consistent with individual clinical circumstances, preferences, information and self-care needs.

### **COMPETENCY STANDARD 4**

Demonstrates comprehensive and advanced knowledge and skills in using evidence-based approaches to providing information and education about breast cancer to clients and their family/significant others about breast cancer treatments, the effects of breast cancer, and self-management strategies across the continuum of care.

#### **Competency Element 4.1**

Provides comprehensive and specialised information to assist clients and their family and/or significant others to achieve optimal health outcomes, reduce distress and make informed decisions about treatment options and supports available within the community.

#### **Performance criteria**

- A. Assesses the client's understanding of their clinical circumstances, treatment and care plan, and preference for information.
- B. Uses advanced supportive communication skills to provide information about potentially distressing or embarrassing issues sensitively and responsively, according to the client's individual preferences and responses.
- C. Demonstrates comprehensive and advanced knowledge of the pathophysiology and progression of breast cancer, and current evidence regarding breast cancer treatments across the care continuum, and the short- and longer term effects of breast cancer and its treatments.

- D. Demonstrates comprehensive knowledge of informational resources for breast cancer clients and facilitates access to resources relevant to client needs and preferences.
- E. Develops, implements and evaluates a plan for providing comprehensive, individualised and timely information to clients about breast cancer and its treatments and effects, throughout the breast cancer continuum.
- F. Uses a range of evidence-based strategies for delivering, tailoring and reinforcing information relevant to client's informational needs and preferences.
- G. Collaborates with other members of the health team to ensure a coordinated approach to providing consistent and timely information to clients with breast cancer.
- H. Supports and clarifies information provided to the client by other members of the health care team regarding breast cancer and its management.

**Competency Element 4.2**

Provides education to clients with breast cancer to enable clients to be active participants in their care and engage in self-management of health-related problems where appropriate to achieve optimal health outcomes across the continuum of breast cancer.

**Performance criteria**

- A. Implements evidence-based educational interventions to assist clients and their family/ significant others to develop knowledge, skills and confidence to manage health needs and problems associated with breast cancer and its treatments.
- B. Consults and collaborates with other members of the health team to facilitate a multidisciplinary and coordinated approach to promoting the client's ability to self-manage health needs and problems associated with breast cancer and its treatments.
- C. Continuously evaluates the client's response to educational interventions and modifies educational strategies, when necessary, to achieve optimal health outcomes for clients with breast cancer.

**DOMAIN: CLINICAL LEADERSHIP**

This domain contains competencies reflecting the ability of the SBN to advance and improve breast cancer care through a range of clinical leadership and professional activities.

**COMPETENCY STANDARD 5**

Contributes to continuous improvements and the advancement of specialist breast nursing and breast cancer care.

**Competency Element 5.1**

**Performance criteria**

- A. Participates in and supports quality improvement and research activities that contribute to advances in breast cancer care.
- B. Demonstrates the skills and values of critical reflection and lifelong learning to generate knowledge for practice.\*
- C. Critically appraises and integrates relevant research findings and other developments in decision making about breast cancer care.\*

*\*Adapted from Nurse Practitioner Competency Standards*

### ***Competency Element 5.2***

Uses appropriate mechanisms for monitoring own performance and competence as a SBN.

#### **Performance criteria**

- A. Practices in accordance with professional and organisational role descriptions, guidelines and standards for specialist breast nursing and breast cancer care.
- B. Demonstrates a commitment to maintaining competence through participation in professional development activities relevant to breast cancer care.
- C. Implements processes for obtaining and responding to information from clients and other members of the health team about the effectiveness of one's practice as an SBN.
- D. Participates in professional clinical supervision and/or other peer-review processes for monitoring the appropriateness of personal and professional responses to individual client situations.
- E. Participates actively in performance review processes.

### ***Competency Element 5.3***

Recognises the need for, and engages in, continuing professional development to ensure practices that incorporate best-available evidence and emerging developments in specialist breast nursing and breast cancer care.

#### **Performance criteria**

- A. Uses relevant sources to seek additional knowledge/information when presented with complex or challenging situations.
- B. Identifies learning needs through critical reflection, performance review and assessment of emerging developments in the practice of specialist breast nursing.
- C. Demonstrates knowledge of relevant professional development resources and activities in specialist breast nursing.

### ***Competency Element 5.4***

Provides expert advice and mentorship to nursing colleagues and others involved in breast cancer care to promote optimal standards.

#### **Performance criteria**

- A. Develops and contributes to education and staff development activities relevant to breast cancer care.
- B. Provides expert advice and professional support to nursing colleagues and others involved in breast cancer care about clinical management and professional issues in breast cancer nursing.
- C. Disseminates information about research and other developments in breast cancer care to nursing colleagues and others involved in breast cancer care.

### **Competency Element 5.5**

Engages in and contributes to informed critique and influence at the professional and systems level of health care.\*

#### **Performance criteria**

- A. Evaluates the impact of health and organisational policy on the health needs of clients with breast cancer and advocates for improvements where relevant within the profession, multidisciplinary team and systems level.
- B. Participates actively in workplace, professional and other organisations relevant to specialist breast nursing.
- C. Demonstrates leadership through participation in public support and advocacy for optimal breast cancer care.
- D. Articulates and promotes the contribution of specialist breast nursing to client outcomes in clinical, professional and political contexts.\*

*\*Adapted from Nurse Practitioner Competency Standards*