



**Australian
College
Occupational
Health
Nurses**

Competency Standards for occupational health nurses

Position statement

The occupational health nurse competency standards were developed by the Australian College of Occupational Health Nurses. Occupational health nursing is an area of advanced nursing practice and consequently these competency standards build onto the Australian Nurse Registering Authority Council (ANRAC) competencies which nurses will acquire prior to registration.

The format of the standards is consistent with the Australian Standards framework and U1e format adopted by the National Training Board and the National Office of Overseas Skills Recognition for Australian Competency Standards. These competency standards are expressed as units – which detail the broad areas of professional practice, elements which describe each unit, and performance criteria - which specify the outcomes of successful performance.

The Australian College of Occupational Health Nurses believes that:

- Competencies can be used
 - as a pre requisite for Membership of the College
 - to maintain professional standards and to promote safe occupational health nursing practice
 - as a means of specifying curriculum requirements
 - to develop position descriptions for employment purposes as a focus for continuing education activities,
- Specific education in occupational health and safety is essential for effective practice as an occupational health nurse, and a post basic education program in occupational health and safety is the fundamental qualification. The college regularly 'approves' tertiary programs within which all of the competencies could be acquired, as well as listing other programs which substantially address the competency standards. It is recognised that the competencies may be acquired through a formal tertiary program and a variety of continuing education activities,
- The College has a responsibility to assist its members with the maintenance of competencies and for this purpose has established a continuing education network,
- The competencies which occupational health nurses are able to demonstrate at any particular time will depend on their current job functions. This reflects the diversity of settings and the variety of factors which influence the practice of occupational health nursing,
- The major responsibility for the acquisition and maintenance of competence relating to the competency standards, rests with the individual occupational health nurse,
- The competency standards for occupational health nurses were developed to encompass the complexity and scope of occupational health nursing positions. The model used incorporated observable nursing practices, underlying capacities (knowledge, skills and abilities) and more generic capabilities such as problem solving, critical analysis and creativity. The assessment guidelines reflect this integrated approach by outlining the various sources of evidence that might be used when assessing performance.

Foreword

In 1991 the Australian College of Occupational Health Nurses (ACOHN) funded a research project to develop competency standards for occupational health nurses. The project was designed to involve the highest possible number of occupational health nurses throughout Australia and utilised techniques such as workshops, expert working groups and consultation to achieve this objective. Management, unions, other occupational health and safety groups, educators and universities also contributed to the project through the Steering Committee consultative process. In addition, the National Training Board (1991) Policy and Guidelines as well as the National Office of Overseas Skills Recognition (1990 and 1992) Guides were followed to ensure format consistency with other workplace standards.

As a result of the above project, competency standards for occupational health nurses and guidelines for the assessment of these standards appear in this document.

It has been recognised by international (International Labour Organisation, 1985) and Australian (National Health and Medical Research Council, 1982) occupational health and safety bodies as well as various occupational health and safety professional groups, that specialised education is a necessity for competent and effective practice in the workplace. These competency standards reflect this principle and are based on nurses having completed a post basic program in occupational health and safety.

In many workplaces the occupational health nurse is the sole occupational health and safety professional and provides all of the occupational health service functions as outlined by the International Labour Organisation (1985). The competency standards acknowledge this fact. The circumstances in which occupational health nurses practice vary enormously and it is recognised that there are a number of factors which may influence the role and functions of the nurse. These factors are:

- the number of occupational health nurses employed at the worksite or in the organisation,
- the number and variety of other occupational health and safety professionals employed in the workplace,
- the organisational philosophy, and
- the occupational health and safety hazards present in the workplace.

These variables may have considerable impact on the nurse's position description and it is believed that in these circumstances, the organisation would only require assessment of the appropriate occupational health nurse competencies.

Developing competencies for such a diverse group of professionals means that the standards are necessarily broad. Individual workplaces or various industries may wish to further classify the standards by developing range indicators. These would provide details of the circumstances in which performance criteria apply.

The overall philosophy which underpins these competency standards is that

Occupational Health Nursing Practice is the application of specialised nursing knowledge and skills for the purpose of conserving, promoting and restoring the health of persons at their place of work. (ACOHN 1988)

This philosophy encompasses the following notions:

- Occupational health nursing is concerned with the social, emotional, and physical wellbeing of individuals. Thus the practice should focus on disease prevention and promotion of health that will contribute to the maintenance of, as well as improvement in the health status of the worker,
- Occupational health nursing is concerned with the worker as a whole, including family and community, therefore part of the role is the determination of health or safety hazards in the environment and control or elimination of those hazards,
- The occupational health nurse is responsible for planning, organising, co-ordinating, controlling and evaluating the occupational health program, that is, managing the workplace health service.

These statements provide the context within which occupational health nurses work and are the framework on which these competency standards are founded.

Competency standards

Unit 1: Practices in accordance with legislation, standards, codes of practice and guidelines

Element	Performance criteria
1.1 <i>Demonstrates a broad knowledge of acts, regulations, codes of practice, standards, guidelines and industrial awards which impact on the workplace.</i>	<p>1.1.1 Acts, regulations, codes of practice and Australian Standards relevant to the organisation are identified, are easily accessible and provide the framework for effective management of occupational health and safety.</p> <p>1.1.2 Anti-discrimination and equal opportunity requirements are incorporated into policies and procedures.</p>
1.2 <i>Practices in accordance with the provisions of occupational health, safety, rehabilitation and workers compensation legislation.</i>	<p>1.2.1 Policies and procedures relating to occupational health and safety are established to comply with legislative requirements.</p> <p>1.2.2 Mechanisms are established to ensure policies and procedures relating to health and safety are evaluated and reviewed on a regular basis.</p> <p>1.2.3 Action is taken when noncompliance is identified.</p>
1.3 <i>Acts in accordance with the Code of Ethics for occupational health nursing practice.</i>	<p>1.3.1 Occupational health service policies and practices recognise the rights of individuals and groups.</p> <p>1.3.2 Confidentiality and security of individual health data is ensured.</p> <p>1.3.3 Occupational health and safety activities are based on professional guidelines for occupational health service delivery.</p> <p>1.3.4 Procedures to ensure appropriate professional development are established and maintained.</p>
1.4 <i>Acts as an adviser and health advocate to all employees</i>	<p>1.4.1 The advisory role is incorporated into service delivery.</p> <p>1.4.2 The health advocacy role is recognised within the organisation</p>

Unit 2: Manages an occupational health service within an organisation

Element

2.1 *Demonstrates a comprehensive knowledge of occupational health principles and practice.*

Performance criteria

2.1.1 Factors that influence the relationship between the health of individuals and their work are considered in the delivery of the occupational health service.

2.1.2 The principles of prevention are incorporated into the occupational health service.

2.1.3 Occupational health and safety issues are addressed in order of priority.

2.2 *Demonstrates a broad knowledge of factors that influence the management of the occupational health & safety service.*

2.2.1 Legislative and government requirements provide the framework for the occupational health and safety system.

2.2.2 The historical, political, social, cultural and industrial influences on the organisation are recognised, understood and reflected in the occupational health and safety service objectives.

2.3 *Manages a quality occupational health service.*

2.3.1 Policies and procedures are developed and implemented for the effective operation of the occupational health service.

2.3.2 The consultative process is used to develop a strategic plan which outlines goals, objectives, responsibilities and the allocation of resources.

2.3.3 The principles of quality assurance are applied to monitor and evaluate the occupational health service.

2.3.4 Ethical and legal issues are considered in the document control process.

2.3.5 Knowledge is continually developed to inform professional practice.

2.3.6 Effective practice involves working as an independent nurse practitioner and member of the occupational health and safety team.

2.3.7 Negotiation skills are used to effect change in the workplace.

2.3.8 Professional communication is maintained

Unit 3: Assesses the work environment and the organisation of work, and recommends measures to prevent adverse health effects

Element

3.1 *Demonstrates a comprehensive knowledge of the impact of work on health and health on work.*

Performance Criteria

3.1.1 A system that ensures all factors that impact on health care within the organisation are considered and are integral to health service delivery.

3.1.2 Expertise from other professionals is utilised as appropriate.

3.2 *Demonstrates a broad knowledge of hazard management.*

3.2.1 Current knowledge of international standards and trends is maintained.

3.2.2 Current legislation, statutory requirements and relevant Australian Standards are used as the minimum standard for effective hazard management.

3.2.3 • Detailed policies and procedures to report and manage hazards are established, maintained and monitored.

3.2.4 Systems are in place to effectively manage workplace hazards according to organisational policies.

3.2.5 Managers and supervisors are trained to manage hazards in their areas of responsibility.

3.2.6 Hazards are identified in collaboration with managers and workers.

3.2.7 Risks relating to the identified hazards are assessed.

3.2.8 Recommendations are made to control the risks using the hierarchy of controls.

3.2.9 Occupational health and safety surveys are conducted in consultation with workplace groups to identify factors hazardous to health and the environment

3.2.10 Documentation relating to hazard management is maintained and meets legislative requirements, professional and organisational standards.

Unit 4: Assesses, monitors and evaluates the workers health status and capacity for work

Element	Performance Criteria
4.1 <i>Demonstrates a broad knowledge of occupational disease and injury.</i>	4.1.1 Nursing knowledge is used when explaining the factors which contribute to disease and injury within the work environment.
	4.1.2 Health effects that may result from work and the working environment are interpreted and discussed with individuals and groups.
	4.1.3 Technical information is provided to workers in a manner that facilitates learning and understanding.
4.2 <i>Demonstrates knowledge of the current rationale for health screening.</i>	4.2.1 Detailed criteria for conducting health screening are documented.
	4.2.2 A formal process for communicating health screening outcomes to appropriate personnel is established.
	4.2.3 Procedures for the maintenance and storage of documentation are established according to legislative, organisational and professional requirements.
4.3 <i>Manages a program of health surveillance appropriate to legislative requirements and the needs of the organisation and workers.</i>	4.3.1 A program for health surveillance is established which directly correlates to the organisation's injury/illness prevention and control strategies.
	4.3.2 Data are collated, interpreted and recommendations made to improve the health of the workers.
4.4 <i>Performs health assessments according to legislative requirements and professional guidelines.</i>	4.4.1 Policies and procedures for the health assessment function are established, documented and evaluated.
	4.4.2 Confidentiality is observed when results of health assessments are being interpreted and communicated.
	4.4.3 A system for maintaining and storing health assessment records is established.
4.5 <i>Counsels workers regarding their health and well being.</i>	4.5.1 A policy and procedures are established to facilitate early recognition of workers requiring counselling and/or referral.
	4.5.2 Appropriate counselling techniques are used to optimise effective outcomes.
	4.5.3 Professional judgment is exercised when documenting counselling activities

Unit 5: Provides information, education, training and advice on occupational health & safety

Element	Performance criteria
5.1 <i>Demonstrates a thorough knowledge of occupational health & safety and other health related information sources.</i>	5.1.1 A current and relevant resource list is maintained. 5.1.2 The organisation's policies and procedures for health and safety are identified and understood. 5.1.3 Relevant data is accessed and utilised. 5.1.4 A professional network is maintained.
5.2 <i>Translates relevant information into practical advice on occupational health & safety.</i>	5.2.1 Information is interpreted and presented in an appropriate format for dissemination. 5.2.2 The process of advising, informing and interpreting is evaluated on a regular basis.
5.3 <i>Identifies occupational health & safety education and training requirements within the organisation.</i>	5.3.1 Legislative requirements and government policies are identified in relation to occupational health & safety education and training 5.3.2 The organisation's philosophy and commitment to occupational health and safety education and training are understood. 5.3.3 An education and training needs analysis is conducted in consultation with all workplace groups. 5.3.4 Education and training information is reviewed to ensure it meets identified needs.
5.4 <i>Plans occupational health & safety education and training programs.</i>	5.4.1 Adult education principles and techniques are incorporated into the development of programs. 5.4.2 Individual variables are considered when planning education and training programs.
5.5 <i>Implements and evaluates the occupational health & safety education and training program.</i>	5.5.1 The planned education and training activities are promoted within the organisation. 5.5.2 Competent staff are elected to deliver the education and training program. 5.5.3 The stated aims and outcomes of the education and training programs are evaluated to ascertain whether or not they have been met. 5.5.4 Documentation is retained for future reference. 5.5.5 The education and training program results are published where appropriate

Unit 6: Manages activities which are designed to enhance the health of workers

Element

6.1 *Demonstrates a broad knowledge of health promotion.*

6.2 *Demonstrates a broad knowledge of international and national targets and goals.*

6.3 *Consults and collaborates with workers to identify their health needs.*

6.4 *Plans, implements and evaluates activities and programs designed to promote health.*

6.5 *Interprets health data utilising nursing knowledge and experience.*

Performance criteria

6.1.1 The principles of health promotion are integrated into the health, safety and welfare management system.

6.2.1 Current community issues are considered when developing occupational health, safety and welfare policy and procedures.

6.2.2 Health education and promotion activities are incorporated in the occupational health and safety program.

6.3.1 A needs analysis is conducted in consultation with all workplace groups.

6.3.2 Outcomes from the needs analysis are collated and disseminated to all relevant workplace groups.

6.4.1 Results of the needs analysis are used to plan workplace activities.

6.4.2 Strategies which identify targets, goals and objectives and required resources are established and reviewed on a regular basis.

6.4.3 The principles of adult learning are applied to each activity.

6.4.4 Health promotion activities are evaluated in relation to stated goals and objectives.

6.5.1 Data are analysed for future work- place health intervention.

6.5.2 Guidelines are established to facilitate worker referral.

Unit 7: Manages an illness and injury treatment service which meets the needs of the organisation

Element

7.1 Demonstrates a broad knowledge of primary, secondary and tertiary health care practices as they relate to the workplace.

7.2 Plans, implements and evaluates an illness and injury treatment service.

7.3 Participates in the emergency response plan.

Performance criteria

7.1.1 Policies and procedures are established to facilitate the management of an effective treatment service for work related illness and injury.

7.1.2 Health care options are explained and informed consent for the provision of health care is obtained.

7.2.1 The first aid and treatment services are established to meet organisational and legislative requirements.

7.2.2 All workers are informed of the role and functions of the illness and injury service.

7.2.3 The organisation's system of health care is planned, monitored and evaluated on a regular basis.

7.3.1 Procedures for the organisation's emergency response plan are established, tested and reviewed regularly.

7.3.2 The role and responsibilities of the occupational health nurse are clearly defined in the emergency response plan.

Unit 8: Manages the rehabilitation of ill or injured workers

Elements

- 8.1 Demonstrates knowledge of the principles and practice of rehabilitation in the workplace.
- 8.2 Develops and implements an agreed system of rehabilitation management.
- 8.3 Adopts an holistic approach to the management of ill or injured workers.

Performance Criteria

- 8.1.1 Legislative requirements are included as an integral part of rehabilitation management.
- 8.1.2 Rehabilitation programs that reflect an understanding of the physiological and psychosocial effects of illness and injury are established.
- 8.2.1 Policies and procedures to facilitate rehabilitation are designed to meet organizational needs.
- 8.2.2 Information relating to rehabilitation is subject to document control.
- 8.2.3 A local network of rehabilitation resources is established and maintained.
- 8.2.4 The organization's system of rehabilitation is evaluated and reviewed on a regular basis.
- 8.3.1 The rehabilitation program takes into account individual needs and goals.
- 8.3.2 The program ensures that support is provided to workers throughout the rehabilitation process.
- 8.3.3 Recommendations are made on assessed training needs of workers.
- 8.4.1 Information is obtained from relevant personnel to design and/or supervise the rehabilitation plan.
- 8.4.2 Job and task analyses are conducted.
- 8.4.3 The return to work process is detailed in the rehabilitation plan.
- 8.4.4 The rehabilitation plan correlates with the injured worker's capacity to work.
- 8.4.5 The rehabilitation plan is monitored and evaluated on a regular basis.
- 8.5.1 Nursing knowledge and experience is utilised to facilitate effective communication.
- 8.5.2 Participants are counselled to maximize the rehabilitation process.
- 8.5.3 Relevant personnel are educated about the issues and benefits of rehabilitation

Unit 9: Applies research methodology to the investigation of occupational health and safety issues

Element		Performance criteria
9.1	Demonstrates a basic knowledge of research methodology and its current application to occupational health and safety.	9.1.1 Appropriate research methodology is applied to occupational health and safety projects.
9.2	Critically reads and interprets relevant research.	9.2.1 Mechanisms are established to readily access research publications. 9.2.2 Research literature is interpreted and where appropriate, applied to occupational health and safety practice.
9.3	Develops a research proposal relating to occupational health and safety or occupational health nursing practice.	9.3.1 An inquiring attitude is adopted to recognise research opportunities. 9.3.2 Questions for research are defined. 9.3.3 Appropriate proposals are developed to research problems or issues in the workplace.
9.4	Conducts and evaluates research projects.	9.4.1 The conduct of research relating to occupational health and safety is incorporated into the occupational health and safety program. 9.4.2 Ethical considerations are recognised and complied with when conducting research. 9.4.3 The outcomes of research projects are evaluated.
9.5	Records and stores data to facilitate retrieval and analysis.	9.5.1 Procedures that relate to recording and storing data are established to meet ethical, legislative and organisational requirements. 9.5.2 Data are analysed and used to plan future directions for occupational health and safety practice.
9.6	Disseminates research outcomes.	9.6.1 The results of research projects are disseminated and published where appropriate.

Guidelines for assessment of the competency standards for occupational health nurses

Introduction

The competency standards for occupational health nurses and guidelines for assessment have been developed by The Australian College of Occupational Health Nurses (ACOHN). Occupational health nurses applying for membership of the ACOHN will be expected to meet the competency standards.

Occupational health nursing is an area of specialist nursing practice. The occupational health nurse competencies have been designed to extend the Australian Nursing Council Incorporated competencies which nurses will acquire prior to registration.

The competency standards for occupational health nurses were developed to encompass the complexity and scope of occupational health nursing positions. The model used incorporated observable nursing practices, underlying capacities (knowledge, skills and abilities) and more generic capabilities such as problem solving, critical analysis and creativity. These assessment guidelines reflect this integrated approach by outlining the various sources of evidence that might be used when assessing performance.

This document aims to provide recommendations on where, when and how assessment should occur, who should conduct the assessment and the factors to be considered in managing the assessment system.

1 The assessment framework

The purpose of assessment is to make a professional judgment about an occupational health nurse's performance. The following framework outlines the most appropriate way to make such judgments.

1.1 Where are competencies assessed?

Assessment can take place in a variety of settings. The competency standards to be assessed, the geographic location, the accessibility of the occupational health nurse and the method of assessment may all influence the setting.

The occupational health nurse undertaking assessment will, where practicable, choose the location and method that is relevant for the competency standards. Assessment may be carried out:

- at the place of work,
- at the ACORN Annual Conference,
- at continuing education activities run by the ACORN,
- at other conferences, workshops and education sessions,
- in tertiary institutions,
- at other locations nominated by ACOHN.

1.2 When are competencies assessed?

Competencies should be assessed on an ongoing basis as part of professional development, and in particular:

- on initial appointment,
- on changing position or employment in occupational health practice, and
- following an extended leave of absence.

1.3 How are competencies assessed?

A variety of methods should be used to gather evidence about an occupational health nurse's performance as this will enhance the reliability of the assessment process. Assessment of the competency standards will consist of a combination of the following methods:

- observation,
- documentation auditing,
- professional portfolio,
- interview,
- case study,

- performance appraisal,
- academic assessment,
- self assessment.

The choice of assessment methods may also be influenced by the competency to be assessed, the work situation and the ability to access resources.

1.4 Who will assess competencies?

The competency standards will be assessed by an expert occupational health nurse. The ACOHN defines an expert occupational health nurse as having:

- current experience in occupational health nursing,
- evidence of continuing professional development
- an ACORN approved tertiary qualification in occupational health and safety, and
- Completed an approved assessor training program.

Competencies which do not specifically relate to occupational health nursing practice could be assessed by a person with a relevant professional background.

The ACOHN defines a person with a relevant professional background as having:

- current experience in occupational health and safety,
- completed a post graduate program in occupational health and safety, and
- completed an approved assessor training program.
- Where practicable the nurse being assessed should have the right to nominate the assessor.

2 Managing the assessment system

Managing the competency assessment system will include the following factors:

- ensuring validity and reliability,
- training of assessors,
- accreditation of assessors,
- guidelines for assessment methods,
- documentation procedures,
- consideration of ethical issues,
- review and appeals process,
- recognition of prior learning,
- review of the assessment system.

2.1 Ensuring validity and reliability

When assessing competencies it is necessary to ensure that the assessment process is both valid and reliable. A valid assessment is one which meets the stated purpose and achieves the intended outcomes (ANRAC, 1990, Vol 3). A reliable assessment is one which achieves the same outcome even when:

- there is a different assessor,
- the assessment occurs in a different environment, and
- it occurs at a different time.

Both validity and reliability of the assessment process can be enhanced by training assessors, by providing assessors with guidelines for each method of assessment and ensuring an appropriate assessment context.

2.2 Training of assessors

Assessors will complete a recognised assessor training course which provides participants with a comprehensive understanding of the competency assessment process, skills in conducting competency assessment, an understanding of the issues which may influence the outcome of the assessment process.

2.3 Accreditation of assessors

Individuals seeking accreditation as assessors of the competency standards for occupational health nurses from the ACOHN, will meet the criteria specified by ACORN.

2.4 Guidelines for assessment methods

Guidelines for each different method of assessment will be developed by the ACOHN and presented in a Handbook for Assessors.

2.5 Documentation procedures

Procedures for the collection and dissemination of data will be established and address the following issues:

- application for assessment,
- negotiation of the circumstances for assessment,
- appropriate document control,
- confidentiality of outcomes,
- notification of results.

2.6 Consideration of ethical issues

The assessor has a responsibility to ensure:

- confidentiality of assessment results
- that assessment results are restricted to agreed authorised individual ,
- that individuals who do not meet the target level of competency are given the opportunity to set goals to achieve the required standard and
- that individuals unable to meet the required competency standard are entitled to participate in the review and appeals process.

2.7 Review and appeals process

The review process provides individuals with an opportunity to appeal against the method of assessment, the outcomes or the assessor's recommendation.

2.8 Recognition of prior learning

Recognition of prior learning is the acknowledgment of a full range of individual skills and knowledge, irrespective of how they have been acquired (Davis, S 1992:6). Assessors should recognise and acknowledge prior learning and give credit for competencies the individual may have acquired.

2.9 Review of the assessment system

The ACOHN will continually monitor the system to assess the competency standards and ensure that the process is subject to document control. In addition, there will be a five yearly critical review of the guidelines for assessment of the competency standards.

Summary

This guidelines document outlines assessment procedures which enable the assessor to:

- make inferences about an occupational health nurse's level of competence,
- decide whether this level meets the competency standards for occupational health nurses, and
- encourage further professional development by providing comprehensive feedback to the individual being assessed.

A variety of methods for assessing the competencies have been described. It is recommended that the most valid assessment method is one which closely resembles the requirements of everyday professional practice. The final part of the document concentrates on issues concerned with implementing and managing the assessment system emphasising the rights of the individual being assessed and the validity and reliability of the assessment process.

References

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Glossary

- **Competency**
A combination of attributes (knowledge, skills, abilities and attitudes) underlying some aspect of successful professional performance.
- **Competency based standards**
Levels of achievement required for competence in key areas of professional practice.
- **Units of competency**
Describes a broad area of professional performance.
- **Elements of competency**
Describe what is done in the professional workplace in each unit of competency (eg. elements are the 'building blocks' of each unit).
- **Performance criteria**
Express what a competent professional would do in terms of observable results and/or behaviour in the workplace. Performance criteria should refer to successful outcomes of performance and not the procedures for carrying out the activity.
- **Range indicator**
A statement of the circumstances in which performance criteria apply.

Source: National Office of Overseas Skills Recognition (1992), A Guide to Development of Competency Standards for Professions, Dept of Employment, Education and Training, AGPS, Canberra.

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