

2ND ADVANCED NURSING SCIENCE & PRACTICE

April 20-21, 2018 | Las Vegas, USA

Addressing the social determinants of health: The nurse practitioner's role

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The social determinants of health are the social, physical, and environmental conditions in a person's life that affect overall health status. Currently, half of all Americans live with one or more chronic conditions, the treatment of which accounts for 86% of the nation's health care expenditures. The social determinants of health, such as poverty, unemployment, food insecurity, and lack of stable housing have been shown to increase rates and severity of chronic conditions and lead to greater morbidity and mortality. Addressing these factors is crucial for obtaining positive health outcomes for patients and is one of the key components in the Department of Health and Human Service's Healthy People 2020 initiative. Nurse practitioners are a growing member of the healthcare team of the underserved and are uniquely prepared to address the social determinants of health. Nurse practitioners have comparable patient medical outcomes to other family practice providers; yet, they offer added benefit for addressing the psychosocial causes of disease through their background and training in the nursing model of health, which focuses on the patient as a holistic being. Nurse practitioners are also experienced in dynamic, collaborative communication with patients and use an interdisciplinary approach to overcome barriers affecting a patient's health status. Thus, through their specific training and experience, nurse practitioners can assist patients to overcome the social determinants of health and live better, healthier lives.

Biography

Karen Howard has completed her graduation from Willamette University in 2011 with a Bachelor's degree in Exercise Science before completing a year as an AmeriCorps Volunteer working to provide medical services to the underserved population in St. Louis, MO. She then graduated from Barnes-Jewish Goldfarb School of Nursing with a Bachelor of Science in Nursing in 2013 and will graduate this May from California State University, Los Angeles with a Master of Science in Nursing – Family Nurse Practitioner and Post-master's certificate in Nursing Education. She currently works as a Critical Care Nurse at Henry Mayo Hospital in Valencia, CA

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