TO PROVIDE the role and function of an advanced practitioner, nurses must have a clear understanding of what constitutes advanced practice.

No precise definition of ‘advanced practice’ is evident from the literature. However, with a variety of perceptions of advanced practice from the US, Australia and the UK taken on board, it is possible to identify the current meanings of advanced practice. While this may provide some convenience and common understanding, it can also precipitate confusion. The fact that we live and work in a country that is culturally different than those above receives scant recognition.

**International definition**

From a global perspective advanced practice is defined as: “The advanced practice nurse/nurse practitioner is a registered nurse who has acquired the expert knowledge base, complex decision making skills and clinical competencies for expanded practice, the characteristics which are shaped by the context and/or country in which he/she is credentialed to practice. A Masters degree is recommended for entry level.”

However, there remains much confusion over advanced practice, not least when terms such as ‘specialist’, ‘expert’ and ‘advanced practitioner’ are used as synonyms for each other.

This suggests that the terms advanced, specialist and expert nursing practice are described according to the individual role and function of individual practitioners. Whereas it is contended that advanced practice distinctively resides in the way that practitioners think about, see and experience clinical practice. The consequence is the divergently professional attitudes to the concept of advanced practice.

However the classical view of conceptual structure supports that advanced practice must have some fundamental characteristics for the concept to be labelled advanced practice in whatever context. Consequently different contexts may label specialist or expert practice as ‘advanced practice’ having not clarified fully the concept or meaning per se.

**Extended nursing practice**

During the 1960s and 1970s the extended or expanded nursing role was introduced throughout nursing practice. The understanding then, related to a movement to encompass expertise from medicine and other disciplines. However, the more recent contemporary term ‘advanced practice’ suggests a more hierarchical movement encompassing the principles of education, experience, research, leadership and consultancy, coupled with personal qualities and scope of practice, rather than expansion or extension into other disciplines.

Neither specialist nor expert practice is new to nursing, but have both gained prominence as advanced practice challenges emerge. From the author’s perspective, both expert and specialist practice are considered necessary throughout the spectrum of advanced clinical practice.

This view is reiterated by the Royal College of Nursing in Australia when advanced practice is defined as practice that utilises extended and expanded skills in providing an advanced level of practice. However, uncertainty surrounds the definition of extended and expanded roles, as these terms are often used inconsistently and interchangeably.

**Advanced practice attributes**

Advanced practice is reflected within a patient focused and quality service provision milieu, advocated through pioneering and developing new roles responsive to changing needs and demands in the healthcare system. The author goes as far as to suggest advanced practice might also be regarded as the modernisation of what we call nursing. It has almost become part of social medicine where nursing is aiming to contribute at an optimal level within the financial constrictions, to the healthcare demands of modern society.

The rapidity of this development while fulfilling the core concepts will remain a major challenge. However advancement to providing patient focused and quality service provision milieu, advocated through pioneering and developing new roles responsive to changing needs and demands in the healthcare system. The author goes as far as to suggest advanced practice might also be regarded as the modernisation of what we call nursing. It has almost become part of social medicine where nursing is aiming to contribute at an optimal level within the financial constrictions, to the healthcare demands of modern society.

The rapidity of this development while fulfilling the core concepts will remain a major challenge.
Advanced Practice

clinically suggests continuous performance, evaluation and learning to maintain competence and ensure optimum responses to patient/client needs. Definitions set a very basic stage on which to work; they do not answer important questions; they only help to form them. Therefore, defining the core concept ‘advanced practice’ does more than this as it provides characteristics that may be observed and measured in practice.

**Advanced practice in reality**

The desire of individual nurses to challenge ritualistic practice and professional role boundaries has provided a monumental shift in the delivery of nursing care. Both clinical and policy developments in healthcare have provided a need for a professional response from nurses.

However today’s complex lifestyles and increased political and economic pressures, along with increased globalisation, face nurses with unprecedented challenges. Advanced practice roles demand the exercise of advanced clinical practice. It is argued that such changes have led to nurses’ confusion as definitions lack clarity and accuracy. In some instances this perspective is said to inhibit the development of true professional status in nursing.7

While improved job satisfaction for the ANP is also attributed to the advanced practice role, fulfilling the core concepts of advanced practice such as patient/staff relationship, expert level of practice, developing designated roles and providing effective response to consumer/health care need, may be increasingly challenging. The need for multidisciplinary support, good working facilities and more ANPs will all be key factors in maintaining implementation of the advanced practice role. However, what is clear is the fruition of advanced practice roles in contributing to improving access and quality of care for service users in Ireland.8

**Defining concept analysis**

The significance of a clear definition of the concept advanced practice cannot be overestimated since without it, advanced practice roles become blurred and difficult to evaluate and identify in practice.

A clarified definition of advanced practice will contribute to further research by facilitating accurate role function and boundaries, enabling the creation of an accurate research tool for use in practice. Advanced practice is a crucial component of the nurse practitioner’s function within the Irish healthcare system. Advanced practice reflects both the art and science of nursing at the coalface of practice.9

**Key attributes**

On the basis of this analysis, an operational definition of advanced practice may be summarised as containing the following attributes:

- Relationship
- Level of practice
- Particular context
- Designated roles
- Effective response to consumer/healthcare need.

Advanced practice is a crucial component of the nurse practitioner’s function within the Irish healthcare system. It comprises activities and processes by which nurses can establish a dual-faceted and empowering relationship to provide optimal health for individuals. Advanced practice reflects both the art and science of nursing at the coalface of practice.9

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References on request from nursing@medmedia.ie

(quote Brady C. WIN 2006; 14 (7): 26-27)