



AAHFN Position Paper

American Association of Heart Failure Nurses Position Paper on the Certified Heart Failure Nurse – Knowledge (CHF-N-K) Certification



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Introduction

Heart failure remains the fastest growing cardiovascular disorder in the U.S. and the most common reason for hospitalization among older adults.^{1,2} With increases in Medicare readmission penalties, as well as the number of hospitals being penalized, the stakes have become higher to improve care to patients with heart failure.³ Nurses are intimately involved with providing care to patients and their families across the continuum of heart failure care and in essentially all health care settings. Whether working in an acute care or outpatient facility, participating on a multidisciplinary heart failure disease management team, conducting clinical research, educating future and/or current clinicians, or, for advanced practice nurses, providing independent management of patients, nurses are in key positions to recognize early signs or symptoms of worsening heart failure, prevent complications, optimize evidence-based therapies, evaluate effectiveness of the current plan of care, facilitate communication among multiple care providers and provide patient education. As a specialty organization dedicated to advancing nursing education, clinical practice and nursing research, the American Association of Heart Failure Nurses (AAHFN) is committed to improving outcomes for patients with heart failure. As such, AAHFN is a leader in meeting the challenges of providing care for these patients in a changing health care environment. Certification is defined by the American Board of Nursing Specialties (ABNS) as “the formal recognition of specialized knowledge, skills, and experience demonstrated by achievement of standards identified by a nursing specialty to promote optimal health outcomes.”⁴ Specialty and subspecialty certification is a mark of clinical excellence and validates the knowledge and problem solving of the test-taker based on the standard. Certification in the subspecialty of heart failure is the formal recognition and validation of achievement of the standards of heart failure nursing care. This designation confirms a basic knowledge about heart failure and exemplifies the commitment to quality care for patients with heart failure. Further, recertification reflects continual learning and adaptation to new or revised evidence related to heart failure assessment, care planning, interventions/treatments, and evaluation of care delivered.

The ABNS establishes and maintains the standards for professional specialty nursing certification and also fulfills a consumer advocate and protection role. In a 2006 survey on the value of certification, over 11,000 nurse respondents, representing 20

specialty organizations, reported a high value for certified practice.⁵ Survey respondents, certified and non-certified nurses, nurse managers, and others, perceived that certification may enhance feelings of personal accomplishment and personal satisfaction, enhance professional credibility, and provide evidence of professional commitment.

There have been varied results from research studies on the relationship between nursing certification and patient outcomes. The ABNS Research Committee Subgroup conducted a systematic review of the literature on this issue and found that several studies identified improvements in patient outcomes attributed to certified nursing practice,^{6–10} while others have not found such a relationship.^{11–13} This ABNS subgroup noted several theoretical and methodological issues that should be addressed in future research on this topic.¹⁴

The American Association of Heart Failure Nurses

Given the high prevalence of heart failure, the types of heart failure (HFpEF vs. HFREF, right vs. left ventricular dysfunction, medical, surgical vs. mechanical circulatory support, and congenital vs. other etiologies) and the complex knowledge and skills required to provide optimal care,¹⁵ it is important that standard knowledge is established and measured for nurses caring for these patients. To that end, when the AAHFN was established in 2004, it began with a mandate from its members and a goal to establish and offer heart failure certification to nurses. This goal became fruition when the Certified Heart Failure Nurse (CHF-N) examination was offered in June 2011. Since then, the exam has been offered on a quarterly basis. Currently there are 1082 CHF-Ns, which is about 50% of AAHFN's membership. Of these, 1067 are from the US, and 15 are from either a US territory or a country outside of the US. Since CHF-N certification must be renewed every 3 years, maintenance of certification is important and may reflect an individual's value for CHF-N status, may be a job requirement, or some other indication. The CHF-N recertification rates have averaged 73% (76% in 2014, 70% in 2015).

While CHF-N initially certified only nurses with *clinical* heart failure experience, nurses from academic settings, employed by industry, or in other non-clinical settings often requested to take the CHF-N examination. After deliberation and consideration, the CHF-N Certification Board and the AAHFN Board of Directors voted unanimously to move forward with this request. In order to

differentiate between the clinical and non-clinical certification, “K” for knowledge was added to CHFN, and the CHFN-K credential was born. While the eligibility criteria have been tailored to ensure the CHFN-K exam candidate equally meets the same CHFN standards, the same examination is used. The first CHFN-K exam was offered in September, 2015.

Position statement

It is the position of AAHFN that:

1. The CHFN and CHFN-K examination is an objective measure of basic requisite knowledge to provide heart failure nursing care.
2. CHFN and CHFN-K recertification encourages continued personal and professional growth in knowledge and the practice of heart failure nursing.
3. Nurses who achieve CHFN or CHFN-K status should professionally display this credential on name badges and following signatures on official documents.

AAHFN strongly advocates and encourages nurses who care for patients with heart failure or who teach management of heart failure seek the CHFN or CHFN-K credential. AAHFN also encourages employers to support nurses in pursuing certification and recertification.

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