Our fingerprints don’t fade

The Difference is in the Evidence
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Nurses who care for patients with wounds, ostomies and incontinence are not created equal. Only specialty nurses who have attended a WOC nursing educational program with precepted clinical experiences and/or are certified by the Wound, Ostomy and Continence Nursing Certification Board can call themselves WOC specialists.

Wound, ostomy and continence nursing is proud to be one of the few specialties recognized by the American Nurses Association (ANA). ANA’s recognition of the scope and standards of practice for WOC nursing as a specialty signifies that WOC nursing adheres to the high standards cultivated by the ANA (WOCN® Society, 2010).

WOC nursing is a distinct and well-defined field of nursing practice, which is international in scope and based on a tested body of specialty-related, evidence-based knowledge (WOCN® Society-WOCNCB®, 2008).

The evidence has shown that patients in agencies with WOC nurses, compared to those without WOC nurses, had significantly better outcomes (Westra, Bliss, Savik, Hou & Borchert, 2013).
The Difference is in the WOC Nurse

With a proven track record of specialty nursing for five decades, WOC nurses provide a wide range of care for people with a variety of disorders. Patients with gastrointestinal, genitourinary, and integumentary system problems may seek acute or rehabilitative care from WOC nurses. As clinical experts, WOC nurses provide direct care to people with abdominal stomas, complex wounds, fistulas, drains, pressure ulcers, and continence disorders. The WOC nurse participates in the assessment, planning, implementation, and evaluation of care for these patients.

The facts are in: As an educator, consultant, researcher, and administrator, the WOC nurse plays a pivotal role in providing optimal patient care in multiple healthcare settings, including inpatient, outpatient, long-term care, and home health (WOCN Society-WOCNCB, 2008).

Patients weigh in on WOC nurses

“When I had a colostomy earlier this year, I was emotionally devastated and physically inept at changing the pouch. I don’t know what I ever would have done without the expert care and compassion of the very competent WOC nurse.”

The premier organizations for the education and certification of WOC nurses are the Wound, Ostomy and Continence Nurses Society™ (WOCN®) and the Wound, Ostomy and Continence Nursing Certification Board (WOCNCB®), respectively. The WOCN Society promotes education of WOC nurses as provided by WOCN-accredited Wound, Ostomy and Continence Nursing Education Programs (WOCNEPs). Competency is demonstrated by completing a WOCN-accredited WOCNEP and/or achieving certification through the WOCNCB (WOCN Society-WOCNCB, 2008).
The Difference is in the Education

Since the 1960s, Wound, Ostomy and Continence Nursing Education Programs (WOCNEPs) have been successfully educating nurses and preparing them to care for patients with wound, ostomy and continence issues. WOCNEPs may provide education in any one specialty or all three. (Only WOCN-accredited WOCNEPs provide an organized, specialty education course for nurses in the areas of ostomy and continence care in addition to wound care.) Each nursing education program adheres to a specific educational curriculum to insure the highest level of education to effectively prepare the WOC specialty nurse. And, WOCNEPs are unique because of the extent of didactic instruction in specialty and professional practice content, including the precepted clinical experiences that each student is required to complete (Bonham, 2009).

To be eligible to take part in a WOCN-accredited nursing education program, students must be registered nurses holding a baccalaureate degree or higher, and have completed at least one year of clinical nursing experience.

Successful graduates of the WOCNEPs have demonstrated competency to enter specialty nursing practice. Information about each available WOCN-accredited WOCNEDP can be found at www.wocn.org.
The WOCNCB sets high standards for certification eligibility. To be eligible to sit for a WOCNCB examination in WOC nursing, each applicant must be a licensed RN and hold at minimum a baccalaureate degree or above. In addition, each applicant must also have completed a WOCN-accredited nursing education program within the last five years, or provide sufficient evidence of post-baccalaureate education that includes 50 contact hours (CEUs or equivalent in college work) in the last five years in each certification in which he or she wishes to become certified; plus completion of 1,500 clinical experience hours during the last five years in each specialty (375 hours of the 1,500 clinical experience hours should be completed within the year prior to the exam) (WOCNCB, 2010). To maintain current certification status, the nurse must recertify every five years.

Diana Gallagher, MS, RN, CWOCN, CFCN, CHT, Past President of the WOCNCB

"Accreditation of the WOCNCB by the National Commission for Certifying Agencies validates that the WOCNCB’s certification process and programs meet our goals to provide specialty certification that protects the public and provide quality services to our certificants. Further, accreditation indicates that the operational structure and management of the WOCNCB meet and exceed the certification industry’s standards for legal, regulatory and association management compliance."

THE VERDICT IS IN

Data from a large, recent U.S. study on the effectiveness of WOC nurses demonstrated that home health care agencies (HHC) with a WOC nurse had significantly better outcomes for both improvement and stabilization of wounds, urinary and bowel incontinence, and urinary tract infections (UTIs) compared to HHC agencies without a WOC nurse (Westra, et al., 2013).
The Difference is in the Experience

A WOC nurse possesses a strong background in evidence-based practice and focuses on prevention and management of complications related to wound, ostomy and continence care. Research has shown that care provided by WOC nurses is a significant factor in achieving better outcomes for patients in agencies with WOC nurses compared to those without WOC nurses (Westra et al., 2013).

Wound Care

Wounds of all types are becoming increasingly problematic and there is a high prevalence and incidence of pressure ulcers. These ongoing, costly problems have attracted attention to the practice of wound care and the need for wound specialists who can meet the growing demand for effective preventive care and management.

As the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) transition to value-based purchasing, the value of WOC nursing is easily identified as facilities and agencies implement best practices to prevent and manage pressure ulcers and other acute and chronic wounds. The emphasis on preventive care is mandated across all care settings, including home health care, particularly as families increasingly care for aging relatives with functional declines (WOCN Society, 2010). WOC nurses are experts in planning and providing the comprehensive preventive care that is necessary to reduce the frequency of these conditions. Research has shown that patients in agencies with WOC nurses who provided in-person visits or consults or telehealth consults, compared to those without WOC nurses, were nearly twice as likely to have improvement in pressure ulcers and 20% to 40% more likely to have improvement in lower extremity and surgical wounds, respectively (Westra et al., 2013).

Other studies have also shown that patients who were cared for by WOC nurses had better outcomes in terms of healing rates and costs of care, compared to patients cared for by other nurses (Arnold & Weir, 1994; Bolton et al., 2004; Harris & Shannon, 2008; Peirce, Tiffany, Kinsey & Link, 2008).

WOC nurses have the education, experience and credentials necessary to provide top-notch wound care, including an in-depth knowledge and understanding of the etiology, pathology, wound healing process, principles of topical and adjunctive therapy, and wound treatments. Specialized skills/abilities of the WOC nurse for wound care include: comprehensive assessment,
product selection, advanced treatment modalities, nutritional assessment/support, performing conservative sharp instrumental wound debridement, chemical cautery, managing complex wounds with fistulas, tubes or drains; recommending preventive strategies including support surfaces for pressure redistribution; and consulting and collaborating to coordinate complex treatment modalities and adjunctive therapies (WOCN Society, 2010).

**Ostomy Care**

WOC nurses provide superior ostomy care. Specialty education in ostomy care that is designed only for experienced, baccalaureate prepared registered nurses is provided by WOCN-accredited WOCNEPs; the only board certification in ostomy care that is dedicated solely to nursing is available from the WOCNCB.

Patients undergoing ostomy surgery, whether temporary or permanent, require intensive physical and emotional care and continued support to return to their normal lives. For patients across all settings with fecal and urinary diversions, fistulas and tubes, WOC nurses provide specialized care with the goals of maximizing independence in self-care and helping patients adapt to the life-altering changes in body image. Specialty care is provided throughout the continuum of care and may include stoma site selection, pre- and post-operative management and education, complex prosthetic fitting, product selection, treatment of peristomal skin complications, sexual counseling, dietary counseling and vocational counseling.

But care does not stop when a patient is sent home from the hospital. The need for specialty care continues well beyond the immediate surgical period. WOC nurses provide long-term support to patients with permanent ostomies through support groups and follow-up care (WOCN Society, 2010).

As our population ages, the need for ostomy care and services will likely increase. To ensure that patients remain independent as long as possible, adaptive equipment for those with sensory deficits or functional limitations require the specialized knowledge, teaching and collaboration of the WOC nurse (WOCN Society, 2010).

**Patients weigh in on WOC nurses**

As one who found himself facing health issues and life-altering changes that needed careful consideration, when I needed calm reassurance and knowledgeable and caring support, that support came in the form of two wonderful WOC nurses. Because of them, living with a stoma is as natural as my life was prior to my surgery.
Continence Care
Caring for individuals with urinary and/or fecal incontinence is a billion-dollar industry (WOCN Society, 2010). The prevalence of incontinence is exemplified by the increasing advertising dollars spent promoting the products that treat the conditions. Urinary incontinence affects one out of 10 community-dwelling adults and one of three residents of long-term care facilities (WOCN Society, 2010). Fecal incontinence affects more than two percent of community-dwelling adults and 12 percent or more of extended-care patients (WOCN Society, 2010). We can only anticipate that the prevalence of continence issues and needs will continue to increase as our population ages.

WOC nurses specializing in continence care help manage patients with incontinence due to muscle or nerve dysfunction, congenital anomalies, infection, surgery, sphincter deficiencies, and psychological disorders. Fortunately, many patients can be cured or will at least experience improvement in their incontinence with treatment. The recent study by Westra and colleagues (2013) showed that patients cared for by home health care agencies with a WOC nurse, compared to agencies without a WOC nurse, were 40 percent more likely to have improvement in urinary incontinence and urinary tract infections, and 14 percent more likely to have improvement in bowel incontinence. HHCs with a WOC nurse were 2.3 times as likely to have stabilization of urinary incontinence, 1.2 times as likely to have stabilization of UTIs, and 1.16 times as likely to have stabilization of fecal incontinence.

REVIEWING THE EVIDENCE
A recent study investigated how WOC nurses affect patient outcomes in home health care settings and found that patients in home health care agencies with a WOC nurse, compared to agencies without a WOC nurse, were:

- Nearly twice as likely to have improvement in pressure ulcers.
- 20% more likely to have improvement in lower extremity ulcers.
- 40% more likely to have improvement in surgical wounds.
- 40% more likely to have improvement in urinary incontinence.
- 14% more likely to have improvement in bowel incontinence.

(Westra et al., 2013)

The specialized skills of a WOC nurse may include complex skin care, prevention strategies, behavior training, bowel training, product selection, prosthetic fitting, pelvic muscle reeducation, intermittent catheterization instruction, biofeedback, and urodynamic testing (WOCN Society, 2010).
The Difference is in Your Facility

With experience comes wisdom and expertise. The great amount of education and preparation that is required to become a WOC nurse enables the nurse to deliver and coordinate excellent skilled care.

There are distinct advantages to employing a WOC nurse who has met the rigorous requirements to complete a WOCNEP and obtain a WOCNCB certification. The expert clinical skills of the WOC nurse are just one aspect of their role that enhances and facilitates patient care. Though direct care may comprise the greater part of many WOC nurse’s role, other roles in the scope of practice for WOC nurses are just as important.

In today’s healthcare climate of rising costs, the WOC nurse plays an important role in facilitating cost containment and enhancing revenue. He or she also enhances regulatory compliance, particularly in the areas of wound and continence management (WOCN Society, 2010).

WOC nurses improve patient care across all settings through advocacy, patient/family education, research and the achievement of positive clinical outcomes (WOCN Society, 2010). These achievements are accomplished through a variety of activities including the following (WOCN Society, 2010):

- Developing a formulary for supply management.
- Developing protocols for cost-effective resource utilization.
- Preventing complications and reducing recidivism.
- Improving the continuity and coordination of care across settings.
- Increasing staff productivity.
- Facilitating reimbursement.
- Enhancing patient satisfaction and loyalty.
- Advocating for supply and service reimbursement.
- Implementing/participating in quality assurance programs.
- Providing staff education and orientation.
- Developing policy and procedures and standards for documentation.
- Participating in research and/or utilizing evidence-based care.

Administrators weigh in on WOC nurses

“We profoundly appreciate the expertise and effort our WOC nurse extends to our patients. This is a much needed skill that many facilities lack.”
As the administrator or decision-maker in your facility, it is important that you understand the differences in a nurse’s basic education, specialty educational preparation (didactic, precepted clinical), nursing experience, and certification/recertification requirements for each area of WOC nursing practice. Your choice should be based on the needs of your facility. If you are looking for a nurse to assume leadership responsibility for managing patients with WOC needs, there is only one choice...a WOC nurse.

If you are in charge of hiring for your facility, be sure to review the facts. Do not make a decision based only on credentials or salary alone. Do not risk the quality of your patient care. Be sure to hire a WOC specialty nurse educated by a WOCN-accredited WOCNEP and/or certified by the WOCNCB.

**Choose a WOC Nurse**

WOC nurses can be educated, certified, and practice in one or more areas of wound, ostomy or continence nursing. Both the WOCN Society and the WOCNCB websites allow you to search for a WOC nurse in your area (in the Patient Information section). This directory allows searching of over 2,100 WOCN Society members who have elected to be listed in the nurse referral database. However, membership in the WOCN Society does not guarantee certification. To confirm certification and verify credentials, contact the WOCNCB (www.wocncb.org).

**WHAT ARE THE CREDENTIALS?**

Look for the following WOCNCB® credentials awarded based on the successful completion of the rigorous certification process:

- CWOCN® Certified Wound Ostomy Continence Nurse
- CWCN® Certified Wound Care Nurse
- COCN® Certified Ostomy Care Nurse
- CCCN® Certified Continence Care Nurse
- CWON™ Certified Wound Ostomy Nurse
- CWOCN-AP™ Certified Wound Ostomy Continence Nurse Advance Practice
- CWON-AP™ Certified Wound Ostomy Nurse Advance Practice
- CWCN-AP™ Certified Wound Care Nurse Advance Practice
- COCN-AP™ Certified Ostomy Nurse Advance Practice
- CCCN-AP™ Certified Continence Care Nurse Advance Practice
- CFCN® Certified Foot Care Nurse

Numerous wound credentials are currently available with varying requirements. For more information about differences in wound care credentialing programs, please refer to the website for a comparison of wound care certification programs (http://www.wocncb.org/become-certified/how_to_choose.pdf).
About the WOCN® Society
The Wound, Ostomy and Continence Nurses Society™ (WOCN®) is a clinician-based professional organization with more than 4,800 members who treat individuals with wound, ostomy and continence needs and are committed to cost-effective and outcome-based healthcare. The WOCN Society supports a comprehensive healthcare system that is focused on wellness, maximizes patients’ health, and minimizes long-range costs. The WOCN Society is dedicated to assuring the availability of appropriate care for individuals with wounds, ostomies, and continence needs because patients deserve health care that helps them maximize their functional status. The WOCN Society encourages the appropriate use of specialty nurses to assure that its goal of giving the most beneficial care in the most cost-effective manner is met (www.wocn.org).

About the Wound, Ostomy and Continence Nursing Certification Board
The WOCNCB® is a professional organization dedicated to promoting the highest standard of consumer care and safety by providing credentialing in the areas of WOC nursing. The WOCNCB has its own governing board and is a distinct and separate organization from the WOCN Society. WOCNCB credentialing provides formal recognition of a nurse’s commitment to high standards in WOC nursing. Certification provides formal recognition of knowledge as a wound, ostomy and/or continence care nurse beyond that gained from traditional nursing education programs. The WOCNCB stands firmly in its belief that WOC certification improves the level and quality of patient care by defining and maintaining competency within the WOC specialties. Furthermore, certification provides a competitive advantage for employment and promotes job satisfaction. The nurse who chooses to certify demonstrates a commitment to excellence in WOC nursing practice and patient protection (www.wocncb.org).

REFERENCES


