



Setting the Standard in Med-Surg Nursing Competency

Leveraging the AMSN Competency Framework for real-time benchmarking and growth planning



ACADEMY OF MEDICAL-SURGICAL NURSES



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Executive Summary

The scope and breadth of the medical-surgical (med-surg) nursing field makes it an attractive option for newly qualified RNs seeking a wide range of nursing experience. For established nurses, it provides a dynamic career that grows in conjunction with their expanding knowledge and expertise.

But how can med-surg nurses perform on a consistent and sustainable growth trajectory if they don't know how high the standard is set? The Academy of Medical-Surgical Nurses (AMSUN) Competency Framework aims to address that by setting a benchmark for individuals and institutions and by building on the base knowledge they acquired through their formal training and early careers.

AMSUN envisioned a competency framework that was robust and comprehensive, one that allowed nurses to self-evaluate their nursing competency and determine how to continue building skills and competencies that will help them go above and beyond. In addition to being used for individual career growth, the Competency Framework is designed to give institutions an in-depth look at how their teams are performing compared with industry standards.

In this paper, we will outline the value, benefits, and expected outcomes for the Competency Framework and how the insights generated by the framework can be leveraged by both

institutions and individual nurses to create detailed and achievable growth strategies and performance metrics to ensure they are on track. Our goal is to empower nurses and organizations with a tool that is comprehensive and reliable so they can accurately measure their success, identify gaps in knowledge and performance, and plan for future growth.



Our Goal

Our goal is to empower nurses and organizations with a tool that is comprehensive and reliable so they can accurately measure their strengths, identify gaps in knowledge and performance, and plan for future growth.

An Introduction to the AMSN Competency Framework

**Competent.
Capable. Confident.**

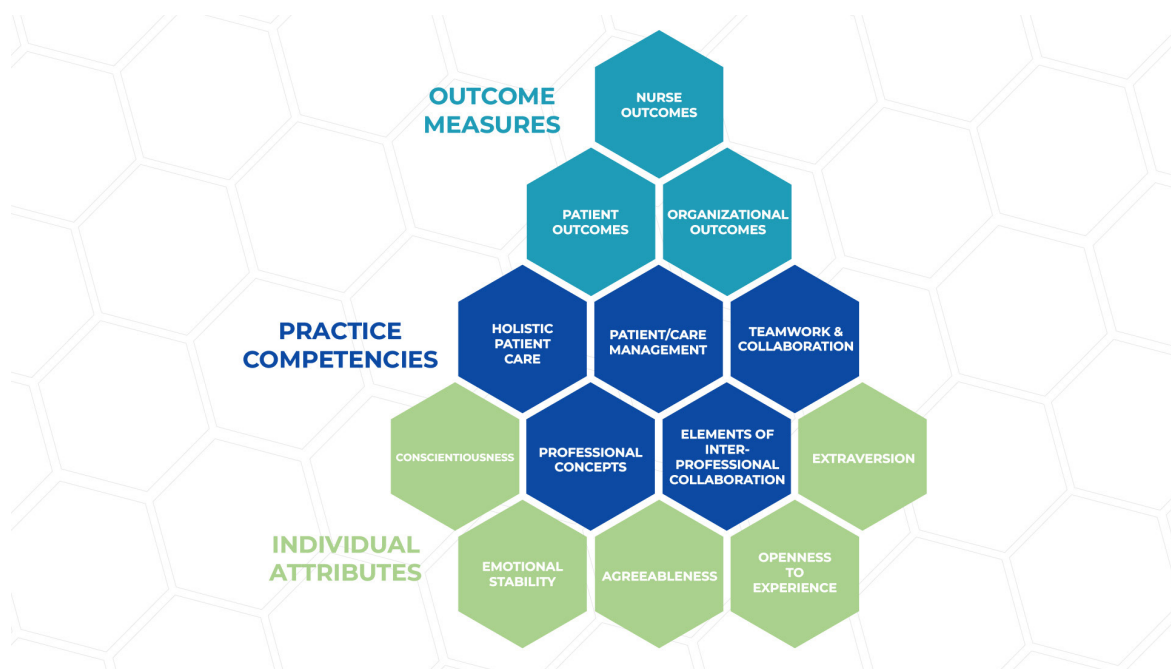
An Overview of the AMSN Competency Framework

For the last decade, “competency” has been an often-repeated buzzword in the world of clinical nursing. However, though nursing competency has shown up with greater frequency in the academic world, it has not yet become a standardized methodology in nursing practice. In our research, we found many institution-based skills assessments but nothing that would qualify as an industry standard or best practice.

Our aim was to create a robust and comprehensive framework that would measure competency that went beyond the fundamentals of nursing higher education. Building on an established knowledge base, our Competency Framework covers three critical dimensions of nursing competency.

AMSN COMPETENCY FRAMEWORK

The AMSN Competency Framework measures three dimensions of competency: individual nurse attributes, practice competencies and outcome measures at the individual nurse, patient and organizational level. Each dimension of the competency framework is made up of specific domains and together, they provide individuals and organizations with a holistic understanding of nurse competency and outcomes for individual nurses, patients, and organizations.



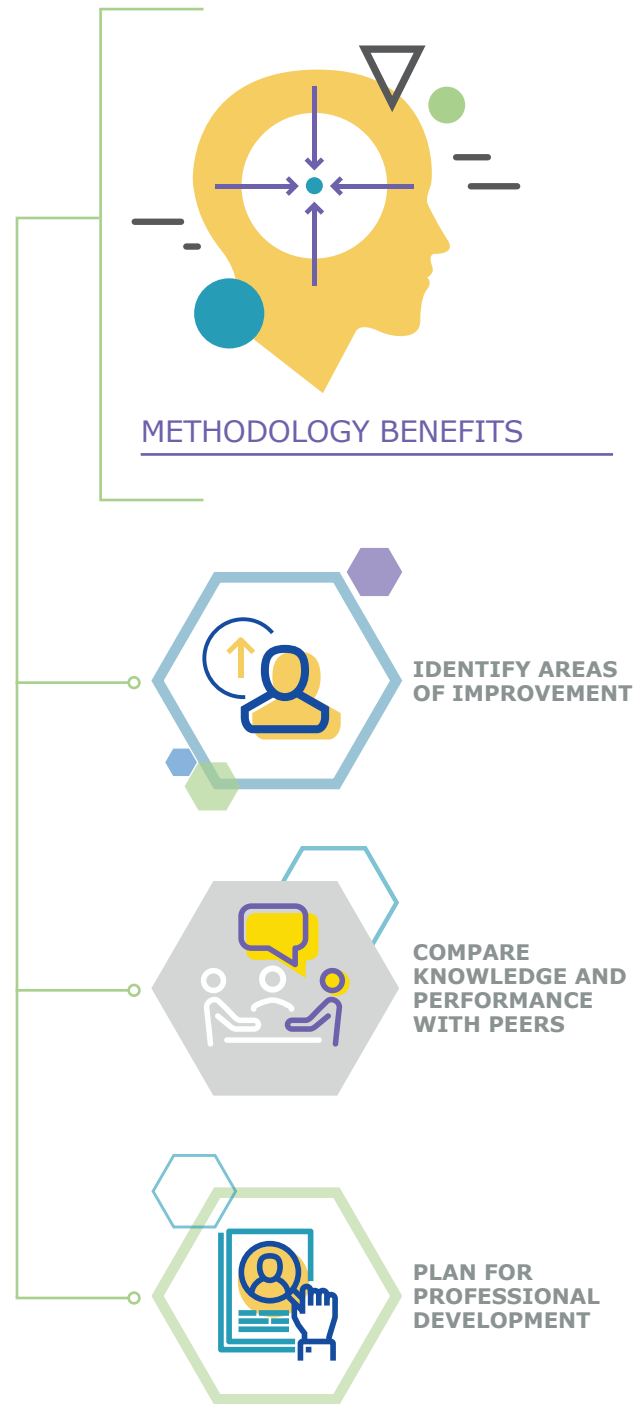
Our Methodology

AMSN assembled a steering committee of nurse leaders, educators and teaching faculty, and workforce experts who understood our goals and advocated for a standardized model of competency built around the knowledge, skills, abilities, and other characteristics (KSAOs) acquired and exhibited by med-surg nurses throughout the lifetime of their clinical careers.

We then appointed a task force of diverse voices in the med-surg field to guide our path as we identified the practice domains and the individual competencies in each, and outlined three proficiency levels.

The domains and competencies found within the framework are universal to med-surg nurses. They can be applied and measured at any proficiency level to measure and benchmark the performance of an individual nurse or team of nurses at the institutional level. The resulting data can then be utilized to build an individualized learning plan for individual or organizational success.

Here, we will take an in-depth look at the history of competency-based performance, professional benchmarking, and the dimensions AMSN has identified as critical levers in the successful growth and performance of med-surg nurses and institutions. Nurses and organizations may use this framework to highlight strengths and identify areas for improvement, measure and understand overall competency profiles on nursing teams, and set in motion a plan for professional development that results in improved outcomes.



A Brief History of Nursing Competency-Based Modeling

Measuring Up in the Med-Surg Field

BENCHMARKING FOR SUCCESS

In an industry that is rapidly changing, it is critical for med-surg nurses to perform at the highest possible level. As one of the largest nursing specializations in the U.S., the med-surg field is highly competitive. And with patients spending more of their time with nurses than physicians or other health care professionals, the capability of the med-surg nurse is more important than ever.

However, at the same time, the nursing profession is facing an overwhelming shortage due to a large population nearing retirement age and to the fallout from the COVID-19 crisis that impacted many nurses and students. In this volatile and ever-changing climate, institutions must have a reliable and clear way to evaluate their nurses, both new and established. Individual nurses must also understand how they stack up to their peers to uncover opportunities for growth and key differentiators to elevate their performance.

While talk of shortages and the continued frustration and burnout of working on the front lines of a global pandemic can be disheartening, it is an opportunity for nurses to position themselves as valuable assets to their organizations and for organizations to ensure they have the highest-qualified, most capable, and most knowledgeable team in place.

COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION

For the last 10 years, competency models have been used to great effect in the realm of higher nursing education. Skills-based assessment is a core component of most nursing programs, but competency models dig even deeper, uncovering broad domains of cross-disciplinary knowledge that measure a student's learning outcomes and expectations. The goal is to ensure that future nurses are equipped not just with credit hours, classroom training, or clinical experience but also with a far-reaching knowledge base that equips them for all areas of practice.

THE FUTURE OF MED-SURG COMPETENCY

We spoke with Jacqueline Savalle, emerging professional director on the AMSN board of directors, and asked her for her thoughts on entering the workforce as a med-surg nurse today and how our Competency Framework can benefit those nurses.

Jacqueline says, “The Competency Framework will allow med-surg nurses to **hone in on their skills** and **feel confident** in those base nursing competencies. Med-surg nurses are expected to have this breadth of knowledge, and it’s a lot of information to be competent in very quickly after graduation. There’s also a very large learning curve when you’re leaving academic nursing and coming into clinical nursing.”

She adds that, especially for med-surg nurses just coming into the profession, the Competency Framework will bring immediate value. “A program like this can add to that value of being able to **transition smoothly and effectively** and quickly to the crazy world of med-surg nursing.”

With such a broad spectrum of patients, treatments, and knowledge to manage, many nurses can feel overwhelmed. But Jacqueline says that most are passionate about learning as much as they can, as quickly as they

can, to better themselves and better serve their patients. “In nursing, we usually call it **evidence-based practice**. And so I want to use the best evidence-based practice to take care of my patients. I want to feel competent about what I know and how I’m able to respond to what’s happening to my patients very quickly. I also want that for my co-workers because I want all of the patients to be taken care of appropriately.”

Ultimately though, Jacqueline sees the AMSN Competency Framework as a way to build a sense of **team and community** among med-surg colleagues. “Something in med-surg nursing that I think a lot of people don’t realize is how much of a team we are. While I might be caring for my four patients, I’m also supporting the nurses that have the other four patients down the hallway or the techs that are caring for my patients as well. And they are there supporting me. If we are able to support each other, all of our patients benefit.”



“A program like this can add to that value of being able to transition smoothly and effectively and quickly to the crazy world of med-surg nursing.”

JACQUELINE SAVALLE
AMSN BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Competency Benefits

Benefits of the AMSN Competency Framework

Raising the bar in med-surg performance assessment and growth planning

Today's med-surg nurses need more than a degree, continuing education credits or hours of clinical experience to get ahead. They need a clear understanding of how their performance measures up to that of their peers, their organization and the med-surg discipline as a whole. The AMSN Competency Framework is the resource they need to benchmark their performance, identify gaps in their knowledge base, and find opportunities to grow and excel.

Methodology

The Competency Framework consists of three dimensions, and these three dimensions indicate an individual nurses' competency and the outcome measures impacted by the nurse's competency profile.

The three dimensions of the Competency Framework are:

- Individual Nurse Attributes
- Practice Competencies
- Outcome Measures

Each dimension is made up of several domains.

AMSN measures competencies in five practice competencies consisting of a total of 28 subdomains:

- Patient/care management
- Holistic patient care
- Elements of interprofessional collaboration
- Professional concepts
- Nursing teamwork and collaboration

In addition to these five practice competency areas, AMSN measures non-cognitive competency with The Big 5 Personality Factors assessment.

The AMSN Competency Framework helps both individuals and organizations measure outcomes with actionable insights and benchmarking capabilities. The knowledge gained from the Competency Framework will assist nurses in navigating their career path in med-surg nursing, and aid institutions in making informed decisions and adapting strategies to achieve better outcomes.

The AMSN Competency Framework can be completed at regular intervals so nurses can stay on top of their progress, understand where they're excelling, and identify areas for improvement.

METHODOLOGY BENEFITS:

- Demonstrates mastery of numerous competencies across the med-surg field.
- Can be used as a comprehensive tool to demonstrate competency across the board, or broken down by dimension, domain or subdomain for more intensive insight into competency progress.
- Is available to individual nurses as well as institutions to benefit personal career development, professional development needs, and overall organizational outcomes.
- Leverages the reputation and trustworthiness of the AMSN name to add legitimacy.



Users

The AMSN Competency Framework is designed to improve outcomes — for patients, institutions, and individual nurses. This is a first-of-its-kind approach within med-surg nursing and evaluates not only knowledge-based and practical competencies but soft skills as well. This makes our framework the most comprehensive and robust offering to measure and benchmark med-surg performance.

USER BENEFITS:

To the Individual:

- Provides a framework that covers every domain the med-surg nurse should master.
- Helps create a roadmap for growth by identifying knowledge gaps and areas for improvement.

- Contributes to professional development by assisting nurses in creating achievable goals.
- Aids incoming and transitioning nurses in evaluating their skills and knowledge as they prepare for job searches.
- Assists in making better clinical decisions that contribute to better patient outcomes.

To the Institution:

- Helps institutions create a benchmark for med-surg nurses at an organizational level.
- Leads to improved performance institutional med-surg nursing teams.
- Gives Institutions insight at-a-glance to identify opportunities for team-wide growth.
- Contributes to better patient outcomes and overall quality of care.

Constructing the Competency Framework

Deconstructing Data to Construct a Competency Framework

Dr. Manny Straehle is an assessment and research consultant and psychometrician with decades of expertise in the credentialing industry. He led the effort to help build the AMSN Competency Framework based on his depth of knowledge and experience, and the data his extensive research uncovered.

His approach to building the Competency Framework was to create a diagnostic tool that would be flexible and dynamic while still offering critical insights on professional assessments and benchmarking. As previously mentioned, no standard competency framework exists within the med-surg nursing specialty. In general, the assessments that do exist simply quantify skills and technical abilities without measuring impact.

That, says Dr. Straehle, is why he wanted to build the AMSN Competency Framework in a different way. “We focused on outcomes,” he says. “Not only on what the competencies are but on which competencies go against the outcomes. So we know what a nurse at the novice or intermediate or expert level does, and we know whether those outcomes go up or down.”

Ultimately, Dr. Straehle says the goal is to create industry and professional standardization for med-surg nurses and institutions. “That’s the beauty of a competency framework,” he says. “It tells you where you’re meeting those standards, but it also tells you where you’re lacking and what you need to do to get to the next step, and the next. So organizations will always know what comes next.”

The Competency Framework, however, is more expansive than other models that are used primarily for recruiting and hiring. It’s also a

valuable tool for the individual med-surg nurse. “When you have a diagnostic tool,” Dr. Straehle says, “and you do a self-assessment, you’re able to figure out where you are and what you need to do to get where you’re going. If you say, ‘I don’t fit into the expert level here,’ you can then look at what will get you to the expert level. Then you can look for the resources and support you need to get there.”

With a dynamic and contextual model like the AMSN Competency Framework, both individuals and institutions can take the pulse of where they are, and where they want to be, all while keeping an eye on the outcomes of their developing competencies. Based on results, organizations can identify gaps and areas of improvement in which they can step up to provide support and education that will promote better outcomes.

One thing Dr. Straehle is sure of is that the Competency Framework won’t always look the same as it does today. “I think that’s the biggest part of any competency framework — it’s dynamic, and it’s ever changing. That’s because the field is always changing, and people are always changing.”

Always growing. Always improving. Ultimately, that is how and why the AMSN Competency Framework was designed — to support professional development that improves overall outcomes.

The Dimensions of Med-Surg Nursing Excellence

Creating a ripple effective of positive outcomes to nurses, organizations, and patients

Dimension Selection

The AMSN Competency Framework is made up of three interdependent dimensions: individual nurse attributes, practice competencies and outcome measures. It begins with the individual nurse attributes, or non-cognitive competencies (soft skills) unique to the nurse at its core because these non-cognitive factors are a component of individual competency and directly related to outcome measures. The framework then encompasses five practice competency domains that cover clinical, professional and interprofessional competencies required of medical-surgical nurses. Lastly, the final dimension represents the outcome measures impacted by mastery of these domains, including patient, organizational, and individual professional nurse outcomes.



Each competency dimension is then broken down into domains and subdomains that cover the wide range of skills and knowledge that med-surg nurses should be expected to master. Within the practice competencies, there are 5 domains and 28 subdomains. The individual attributes dimension measures alignment with the Big 5 personality traits and assesses non-cognitive competencies based on the attributes of each nurse rather than on a demonstration of their skills. The outcome measures represent the three outcome domains that are achieved based on the nurse's individual competency profile.

Individual Attributes:

- Extraversion
- Conscientiousness
- Agreeableness
- Emotional Stability
- Openness to Experience

Practice Competencies:

- Patient/Care Management
- Holistic Patient Care
- Elements of Interprofessional Collaboration
- Professional Concepts
- Nursing Teamwork and Collaboration

Outcome Measures:

- Patient Outcomes
- Organizational Outcomes
- Individual Nurse Outcomes

Proficiency Levels

AMSN has identified three levels of proficiency that create a spectrum of med-surg nursing competency. The framework can be used for measurement of competency at any level of proficiency, thus creating a multi-layered, flexible tool that can adapt and grow with each individual nurse throughout the course of his or her career. **The proficiency levels identified through our research are:**

- Emerging
- Established
- Expert

These levels do not directly correlate to the number of years in the profession but, rather, act as a guideline for the skills and competencies nurses should be able to demonstrate at each level. Nurses may also find that they are not at the same level across the board. They may be at one level for a particular domain or specific competency, while their mastery of other competencies places them at a different level within that domain.

Individual Attributes Dimension

The first dimension of competency assesses the individual nurse’s dominant personality traits based on the “Big 5” personality assessment (Harris & Fleming, 2017; Judge et al., 2002; Therasa & Vijayabanu, 2015). Each domain or factor measures a nurse’s alignment with these traits and the likelihood that they will make decisions based on their dominant trait, and that their overall performance will be similarly influenced by those traits.

DOMAIN	DESCRIPTION
Extraversion	Is prone to positive emotions and strength in developing interpersonal relationships. Assertive, energetic, active, and social.
Agreeableness	Exhibits traits such as cooperation, helpfulness, caring, nurturing, trusting, and being helpful. Values relationships and enjoys social situations.
Conscientiousness	Demonstrates traits such as dependability, stability, responsibility, reliability, and organization.
Openness to Experience	Demonstrates traits such as originality, imagination, innovativeness, willingness to take risks, and creativity.
Emotional Stability	Demonstrates traits such as calmness, being even-tempered, and secure.

Practice Competencies Dimension

AMSN worked closely with competency experts and a diverse group of medical-surgical subject matter experts to identify, define and validate the clinical and professional competencies required of medical-surgical nurses at every proficiency level. There were over 400 knowledge and task statements validated by over 1,600 medical-surgical nurses across the United States. Practice competencies were identified and validated across 28 subdomains of competency in 5 domain areas. The table below demonstrates the domains and subdomains found within the practice competencies dimension.

DOMAIN	SUBDOMAIN
Patient/Care Management	Infection Prevention
	Medication Management
	Pain Management
	Non-Pharmacological Interventions
	Surgical/Procedural Management
	Nutrition
Holistic Patient Care	Patient-Centered Care
	Diversity and Inclusion
	Education of Patients and Families
	Health Promotion
	Palliative/End-of-Life Care
Elements of Interprofessional Care	Nursing Process/Clinical Judgment Measurement Model
	Interprofessional Collaboration
	Care Coordination & Transition Management

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DOMAIN	SUBDOMAIN
	Documentation
	Technology
Professional Concepts	Communication
	Critical Thinking
	Healthy Practice Environment
	Scope of Practice & Ethics
	Quality Management
	Evidence-Based Practice & Research
Nursing Teamwork & Collaboration	Delegation & Supervision
	Career Development Relationships
	Professional Development
	Leadership
	Disaster Management & Planning

Competency Framework Outcome Measures

The final dimension of the Competency Framework is the outcome measures that are expected for patients, organizations and individual nurses based on the competency profile of the individual nurse. While nurses may have widely varied goals for their careers and professional development, they have a common drive to serve and care for patients. Similarly, each institution is likely to have its own set of standards and methodologies for measuring success, but all desire to see improved patient outcomes. This is why understanding these outcomes is crucial to effectively using the framework to benchmark performance, identify opportunities and plan for future growth.

Expected Patient and Organizational Outcomes

Outcome measures for patients and organizations are related, as the overall competency demonstrated by an institution's nurses contribute to the performance, efficiency and quality of services provided. Organizations using the Competency Framework can understand how the competency profile of their nursing staff impact patient, institutional and nursing outcomes.



Patient/ Organizational Outcomes

- Increased patient satisfaction
- Increased patient safety
- Ability to manage complications
- Efficiency in task completion



Individual Nurse Outcomes

- Less absenteeism, turnover, and burnout
- Leadership and career advancement
- Independence
- More collaboration and team effectiveness

DOMAIN	SUBDOMAIN
Patient Outcomes	Patient Safety
	Patient Satisfaction
Organizational Outcomes	Ability to Manage Complications
	Efficiency in Task Completion
Individual Nurse Outcomes	Job Satisfaction
	Leadership/Career Advancement
	Independence
	Collaboration/Team Effectiveness

Proficiency Levels

AMSN has identified three dimensions of clinical, professional and non-cognitive proficiency used to structure the Competency Framework. In our research, we found numerous professional assessments and competency models with multiple proficiency levels, and were able to distill those characteristics down to three levels that apply specifically to the med-surg nurse throughout his or her career (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1980; Miller, 1990; National Institutes of Health, n.d.).

Emerging:

This category generally applies to nurses just entering clinical practice. The emerging med-surg nurse has foundational knowledge, but has often not yet had the experience to make critical decisions, and may seek guidance from senior nurses and more experienced peers to complete daily tasks. Emerging nurses look to rules, guidelines and regulations to assist them in decision-making.

Established:

Established nurses are experienced in a broad array of skills and competencies. They look to routines and standards to guide their practice and generally do not need support or input from peers or experts to complete their work. They are more likely to operate independently and make decisions with greater confidence.

Expert:

Expert nurses are flexible, quick thinkers who are readily able to adapt to unexpected situations and use their experience and intuition to make swift decisions. They are guided by strategic thinking and planning and can view most challenges from a high level. They are less focused on simply completing tasks and more focused on improving processes and systems. They are also the most likely to provide guidance and coaching to other nurses.

Conclusion:

It is important to reiterate that demonstration of these proficiency levels is unique within each competency. Individual nurses may find that they are not at one particular level across the board but, rather, demonstrate differing proficiency levels across each domain and subdomain based on their knowledge, experience, and personality traits.

An Example of Proficiency Levels in the Competency Framework

Domain: Patient/Care Management

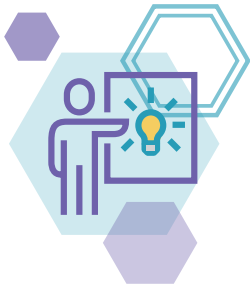
Competency: Infection Prevention

Emerging	Established	Expert
Uses universal precautions to ensure personal and patient safety	Monitors compliance with infection control practices	Informs team members of infection control metrics
Identifies and implements transmission-based precautions based on patient’s history and symptoms	Educates on compliance with infection control practices (e.g., patients, families)	Allocates resources for infection control equipment and supplies
Recommends products and processes for infection control	Collaborates with interprofessional team to promote antimicrobial stewardship	

About AMSN

About AMSN

AMSN is the only specialty nursing organization dedicated to the practice of med-surg nursing. Founded in 1991 with the goal of meeting the rapidly evolving needs of the med-surg industry, AMSN remains committed to achieving the highest level of clinical and professional performance to assure the public of the highest level of cost-effective, quality patient care by our membership.



OUR MISSION

Our mission is to act as a dynamic community of medical-surgical nurses that are committed to quality patient care through professional development, certification, scholarship, and advocacy.

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