

## A Brief History and Overview of Holistic Nursing

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Nursing has been grounded in holistic principles and has incorporated natural remedies and healing therapies since the 1700's. The use of compresses, fomentations, poultices, plasters, oils, liniments, salves, ointments and teas made from medicinal herbs was common practice in early nursing. As late as the mid-1900's American nursing texts routinely included plant medicine theory in their curriculum.<sup>1</sup> The purview of nursing education has always considered the whole person. Nursing curriculums and practicums address the physiological, psychological, sociological, emotional, relational and spiritual aspects of human beings. Caring and healing have been a foundation of nursing practice.

The founder of modern nursing, Florence Nightingale, understood the inseparability of a person's health and the environment. She emphasized the importance of pure air, pure water, cleanliness, and light in creating and maintaining health. In her *Notes on Nursing*, Nightingale clearly articulated the primacy of nature in the healing process along with the role of the nurse:

It is often thought that medicine is the curative process. It is no such thing ... Surgery removes the bullet out of the limb, which is an obstruction to cure, but nature heals the wound. So it is with medicine; medicine so far as we know, assists nature to remove the obstruction, but does nothing more. And what nursing has to do in either case, is to put the patient in the best condition for nature to act upon him.<sup>2</sup>

While holistic principles and the inclusion of natural therapies were foundational in the early practice of nursing, they were largely abandoned by the mid to later part of the 1900's. In the later part of the 1900's technology superseded the human connection and healthcare began to change from a "service profession" to a "for-profit business." The caring and healing connection that was

fundamental to nursing was subdued by an emerging culture that valued efficiency and profit margins. Nurses were frustrated by their inability to deliver quality care and to tend to the needs of the person as a whole. It was out of this milieu that the American Holistic Nurses Association emerged.

The first meeting of the AHNA was held on January 17, 1981, in Houston, Texas where 33 nurses from eight states came together to share stories and create a vision for the future. Today the AHNA serves more than 5500 members through 166 local chapters and networks in the U.S. and abroad. The primary mission of the AHNA is the advancement of holistic healthcare through education, as well as community-building among nurses, other healthcare professionals, and the public. (Terri Roberts, personal communication, May 9, 2019)

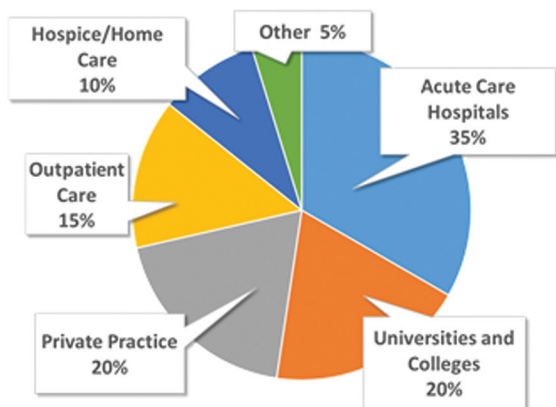
In 1997 the American Holistic Nurses Certification Corporation (AHNCC) was formed to provide credentialing programs in holistic nursing. Today the AHNCC offers several certification options for registered nurses based on level of education. Certification for nurse coaches is also available through the AHNCC. To date, 2,433 nurses have received certification in Holistic Nursing. In addition, the AHNCC endorses 14 nursing programs in universities across the nation whose curriculum meets specific criteria for integrating holistic concepts, theories, practices and principles. (Margaret Erickson, personal communication, May 9, 2019)

Holistic Nursing is defined as "all nursing practice that has healing the whole person as its goal."<sup>3</sup> Thus, holistic nursing can be practiced in any setting whether it be an acute care hospital, hospice, academia or private practice (figure 1). In 2006, the American Nurses Association (ANA) officially recognized holistic nursing as a distinct nursing specialty with a defined scope and standards of practice.

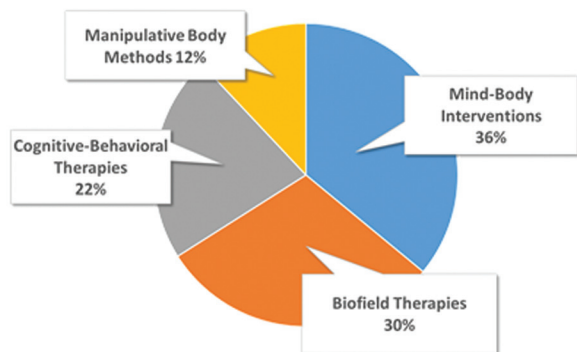
Holistic nurses use a variety of healing and integrative therapies (figure 2). They regularly employ imagery, visualization, relaxation, deep-breathing techniques, stress management, aromatherapy, and subtle energy therapies for patients in hospitals and private practice

Holistic nurses understand the scope of practice for conventional and non-conventional providers of health

**Figure 1.** Work Settings of Holistic Nurses (2017 survey of 5000 AHNA members)



**Figure 2.** Therapies used by Holistic Nurses (2017 survey of 5000 AHNA members)



care and medicine. They provide information, guidance and counseling to help people coordinate their care and to navigate the complexities that exist between the various healthcare and healing professions. e.g., MD's, ND's, DC's, DO's, L.Ac's, LMT's etc.

As the delivery of care becomes more complex, the need to coordinate care among multiple providers becomes extremely important. Holistic nurses play a major role in coordinating services and bringing caring and healing back to healthcare.

**References**

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3. American Holistic Nurses Association. (1998) *Description of holistic nursing*. Flagstaff, AZ: AHNA.