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Introduction

The Royal College of Nursing Defence Nursing Forum (DNF) is the largest professional forum for military nurses in the UK. A recent survey of the DNF membership (RCN, 2013a) highlighted a need for professional guidance to help advance military nursing practice and to emphasise how military nursing can enhance patient care. The Royal College of Nursing (RCN) has defined the role and skills of specialist nurses in a number of publications (RCN, 2013b; RCN, 2012a; RCN, 2012b). The DNF steering committee believes this document is the first stage in underpinning all that we do as defence nurses and health care assistants (HCA) and also outlines how the DNF can support you in your professional development.

Designed to be used by nurses, HCAs and employers this guidance will help develop individual roles, new or existing services; provide an understanding of the role of military nursing; and identify developments in this specialty.

Defining defence nursing practice

Modern nursing can be identified as originating from the work of Florence Nightingale and the support provided to young men serving within the British Armed Forces. However, there is evidence of nurses providing care during the English Civil War in 1642 (Skeet, 1980; von Arni, 2001; Murray, 2011).

Today regular and reserve nurses from the Royal Navy (Queen Alexandra’s Royal Naval Nursing Service (QARNNS)), Army (Queen Alexandra’s Royal Army Nursing Corps (QARANC)) and the Royal Air Force (RAF) (Princess Mary’s Royal Air Force Nursing Service (PMRAFNS)) continue to provide professional nursing care to service personnel, their families and others that are eligible throughout the world on deployed operations, military exercises and health care systems. Each service is responsible for leading on specific operational environments. The Royal Navy leads on maritime (sea), the Army on land and the RAF on aeromedical nursing care issues and provision.

Uniformed nurses are also supported by British Army health care assistants and Ministry of Defence (MoD) nurses. MoD nurses provide health care to serving personnel and their families throughout the non-deployed health care setting. Collectively they all form the Defence Medical Services (DMS).
Structure of the UK defence medical services

The primary function of the defence medical services (DMS) is to ensure service medical personnel are ready and medically fit for deployment. This involves managing primary health care, dental care, hospital care, rehabilitation, occupational health, community mental health and specialist medical care for all military personnel (MoD, 2014a). The nursing service is the largest single specialist group within the DMS, demonstrating the contribution nurses make within the operational patient pathway (MoD, 2011a).

The professional lead for the DMS is the Surgeon General who is supported by the Defence Nurse Adviser (DNA), a senior uniformed nurse who represents nursing at MoD Headquarters Surgeon Generals (HQSG) Department. The DNA works closely with each single service director of nursing to liaise and discuss practice and policy (MoD, 2014a).

Single service nursing

Each service has its own military ethos (beliefs), cultures, history and hierarchy (Harper, 2006) (see The pecking order structure diagram on page 14). However, there are similarities in professional standards relating to recruitment and development.

Today, military nursing provides various career options including a career as an officer or other rank; both allow individuals to undertake graduate nurse training or direct entry as a qualified nurse within the adult or mental health branches. Regardless of rank, all personnel must undertake and pass their service’s basic military training.

Further information on careers can be found at:

- Royal Navy
  www.royalnavy.mod.uk/Careers/Role-finder/Roles/Naval-Nurse-Qualified

- Army
  www.army.mod.uk/rolefinder/role/184/adult-health-nurse

- RAF
  www.raf.mod.uk/careers/jobs
Regular nursing

All regular nurses maintain clinical skills in either Defence Primary Health Care (DPHC), Ministry of Defence Hospital Units (MDHUs), the Royal Centre for Defence Medicine (RCDM) or the Defence Medical Rehabilitation Centre (DMRC) (see Box 1). Mental health nurses maintain their clinical skills within Departments of Community Mental Health (DCMH).

There are also opportunities to undertake postings to training establishments, education, recruiting and military units (such as field hospitals or medical regiments), Tactical Medical Wing (TMW), Deployable Aeromedical Response Team (DARTS) or on board the Royal Navy’s Primary Casualty Receiving Facility RFA Argus depending on service and role.

Box 1: Location of military secondary care units within the UK

**Royal Centre for Defence Medicine (RCDM)**
Based at Queen Elizabeth NHS Foundation Trust, Birmingham
Primary receiving hospital for service personnel injured whilst on operational deployments.

**Ministry of Defence Hospital Units (MDHU)**
MDHUs are clinical units consisting of military doctors, nurses and allied health professionals (AHPs) based within National Health Service (NHS) hospitals, geographically located near military units.

- MDHU Derriford
- MDHU Frimley Park
- MDHU Portsmouth
- MDHU Northallerton

Reserve forces nursing

Recent government strategies have increased the role of the UK’s reservists. As a result, this has included greater integration with the regulars and better terms of service (MoD, 2011b). Opportunities for nurses to join the Royal Navy Reserves, Army Reserves and the Royal Air Force Reserves exist.
Reserve nurses and HCAs follow similar pathways to regulars, this includes basic training, access to professional training and opportunities to deploy in a variety of clinical roles as outlined above. Reservists also provide additional support for wider clinical specialties, for example, ophthalmic nursing and infection prevention and control (IPC).

Further information can be found at:

- Royal Navy Reserves
  www.royalnavy.mod.uk/Careers/Role-finder/Naval-Reserves

- Army Reserves
  www.army.mod.uk/join/20080.aspx

- Royal Air Force Reserves
  www.raf.mod.uk/rafreserves

**Army health care assistants**

The British Army is the only service to employ and train HCAs. Their role spans both UK and operational environments. Students complete a 16-week clinical trade training course at the Defence College of Healthcare Education and Training (DCHET). The course includes theoretical and practical aspects of health care, practical and written assessments, which culminates in an Advanced Apprenticeship in Clinical Healthcare Support (MoD, 2009). HCAs are then posted to a MDHU in order to consolidate and complete further training. Career progression includes opportunities to progress to an assistant practitioner (AP) role or a health support officer (HSO).

**Ministry of Defence (MoD) nursing**

MoD nurses are civilian colleagues who deliver primary and secondary health care throughout non-deployable bases and work alongside military personnel. They also provide a valuable role in force generation, force protection and health promotion amongst service personnel and their families.
Operational nursing

Defence nurses must be able to provide nursing care within hostile, unpredictable and challenging environments where flexibility is required. This flexibility is demonstrated by the areas of clinical interest of DNF members. During the DNF membership survey (RCN, 2013b), members indicated a wide area of interest which included*:

- aeromedical evacuation (RAF only)
- anaesthetics
- apheresis
- austere and disaster relief nursing
- burns and plastics
- chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear (CBRN) nursing
- critical care
- education
- emergency nursing
- general medicine
- health protection
- infection prevention and control
- leadership and senior management
- mental health
- occupational health
- operating theatre
- ophthalmology
- paediatrics
- pain
- patient safety/governance
- patient transfer (pre-hospital, maritime and land-based transfers)
- primary care
- rehabilitation (including sports medicine)
- research
- sexual health
- surgical nursing
- trauma and orthopaedics
- travel health.

* These are survey results not a list of clinical opportunities or roles.

All care provided within deployed UK medical treatment facilities (MTF) aims to be the same standard as provided within the NHS and, as such, is evaluated by the Care Quality Commission and internal validation (BMA, 2012; Bricknell and McArthur, 2011; MoD, 2011a; CQC, 2012). Additionally, wherever military nurses work they are bound by the Nursing and Midwifery Council Code (NMC, 2008) and by international laws when deployed, including the Geneva Convention.
In order to prepare and maintain operational nursing experience, nurses demonstrate their professional competence by continuing professional development which encompasses professional, clinical and military requirements.

The defence operational nursing competences (DONC) are key to preparing defence nurses in their operational role. Currently, there are core competences and additional annexes pertaining to the maritime, land and air environments. A BSc (Hons) programme in defence health care studies exists to inform operational learning and professional development (MoD, 2014b).

**Box 2: Post-registration clinical pathway**

- **Officer/other rank**
  - Qualified adult or mental health nurse
  - Preceptorship programme if appropriate
  - Defence operational nursing competences
    - Re-validated every three years
    - Completion of BSc (Hons) defence health care studies or similar (if required)
    - Specialist course: eg, critical care, emergency nursing, non-medical prescribers course
    - Military clinical post-registration courses specific to service eg, aeromedical course CBRN
  - Higher level training and practice
    - MSc nursing
    - PhD
Research and development: Academic Department of Military Nursing

In 2012, the DMS set up the Academic Department of Military Nursing (ADMN) and a defence professor of nursing (Finnegan, 2013a). The role of the ADMN is to advise the Surgeon General and other elements of the DMS on professional, academic and educational issues relating to nursing.

In addition to the ADMN, in 2012 the Army has developed the Nursing Research Professoriate. The aim of this group is to provide ‘robust, empirical army nursing studies, to positively influence operational and contingency planning and capability building,’ (Finnegan, 2013b).

RCN Defence Nursing Forum (DNF)

The DNF is the largest professional organisation for military nurses. Membership is open to all nurses and HCAs with an interest in military nursing. The DNF’s mission is to develop nursing policy and practice by:

• developing guidance documents for nurses and HCAs spanning all clinical specialties within defence nursing services
• carrying out research
• working with other organisations to develop guidance and policy
• organising conferences and study events to share good practice
• providing an opportunity to network with other defence nurses and RCN members.

To find out more visit the DNF pages at www.rcn.org.uk/forums
References


Military terminology

ADMN Academic Department of Military Nursing
AP Assistant practitioner
CBRN Chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear
CCAST Critical care air support team
CMT Combat medical technician
DANS Director army nursing services
DARTS Deployable aeromedical response team squadron
DCHET Defence College of Healthcare Education and Training
DCMH Department of Community Mental Health
DMRC Defence medical rehabilitation centre
DMS Defence medical services
DNA Defence nurse adviser
DNF Defence nursing forum
DNNS Director naval nursing services
DNS Director nursing services
DONC Defence operational nursing competences
FM Flight medic
HCA Health care assistant
HCSW Health care support worker
HSO Health support officer
HQSG Headquarters Surgeon General’s Department
JFC Joint forces command
KSF Knowledge and skills framework
MA Medical assistant
MDHU Ministry of Defence Hospital Unit
MERT Medical emergency response team
MNP Military nurse practitioner
MSO Medical support officer
MTF Medical treatment facility
PHC Primary health care
PJHQ Permanent joint headquarters
PMRAFNS Princess Mary’s Royal Air Force Nursing Service
QARANC Queen Alexandra’s Royal Army Nursing Corps
QARNNS Queen Alexandra’s Royal Naval Nursing Service
RAF Royal Air Force
RCDM Royal Centre for Defence Medicine
RN Royal Navy
RNR Royal Navy Reserves
Military structures

The RCN represents nurses and nursing, promotes excellence in practice and shapes health policies

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