



Refugee Nurses Australia (RNA)

Refugee Health Nurse Standards of Practice – Competencies

Introduction

This competency framework is designed to reflect the dynamic and evolving nature of nursing practice within refugee health. It recognises that expertise is not static, but developed progressively through clinical experience, critical reflection, and ongoing learning. Structured around seven Refugee Health Nurse Standards of Practice¹, the framework articulates the core dimensions of practice specific to refugee health nursing. These standards are underpinned by and aligned to the Nursing and Midwifery Board of Australia (NMBA) Registered Nurse Standards for Practice², ensuring consistency with national regulatory expectations while responding to the unique and complex context of refugee health care. Aligned to each standard of practice, the framework outlines how nurses build and deepen their capabilities—from novice to expert—within the unique and complex context of refugee health care. It acknowledges that growth is shaped not only by skill acquisition, but by the development of cultural responsiveness, trauma-informed practice, and reflective judgement, enabling nurses to provide increasingly safe, effective, and person-centred care.

Standard 1 - Practices in a manner consistent with professional and health system values

Refugee health nurses operate in alignment with national legislation, policies, guidelines and standards of nursing practice. Their practice is grounded in professional, evidence-based practice, research and contemporary knowledge.

The refugee health nurse:

1.1 recognises the value of continuous education and professional reflection

Novice RN	Competent RN	Expert RN (advanced practice)
Participates in mandatory training, workshops and in-service education.	Attends mandatory training, workshops and in-service training and external conferences. Engages with print and digital media to access ongoing professional education.	Supports ongoing education for Novice and Competent RN Submits abstracts and presents at conferences on a local, national and international level.

1.2 complies with policies and guidelines that have implications for practice

Novice RN	Competent RN	Expert RN (advanced practice)
Adheres to applicable policies and guidelines.	Adheres to, supports and ensures team compliance to all relevant policies and guidelines.	Supports implementation of evidence-based policies and guidelines.

1.3 contributes to local, state and national guidelines, membership of working parties and professional associations

Novice RN	Competent RN	Expert RN (advanced practice)
<p>Accesses local, state and national policies.</p> <p>Understands how policies inform practice.</p>	<p>Contributes to local policy development. Participates in local working parties and professional associations.</p>	<p>Contributes to, or authors evidence-based policies and guidelines at a local, state, and national level.</p> <p>Leads evidence-based practice policies at local, state and national level. Holds leadership roles in professional associations at state or national level.</p>

1.4 acknowledges the risk of vicarious trauma and actively engages with relevant support systems including peer/clinical supervision and debriefing

Novice RN	Competent RN	Expert RN (advanced practice)
<p>Engages in clinical supervision.</p>	<p>Engages in clinical supervision and undertakes self-reflection.</p>	<p>Facilitates and supports clinical supervision and debriefing.</p> <p>Advocates for the provision of clinical supervision to be embedded into local budget planning processes.</p>

Standard 2 - Communicates effectively

Effective communication is fundamental to therapeutic relationships. Refugee health nurses recognise the critical role that qualified interpreters play in enabling the refugee health nurse to deliver care in everyday practice.

The refugee health nurse:

2.1 understands the legal/ethical frameworks of using interpreters as fundamental to quality practice and advocates for the use of a qualified interpreter as a right for effective communication

Novice RN	Competent RN	Expert RN (advanced practice)
<p>Understands and adheres to local service policies regarding the appropriate engagement of interpreters in healthcare settings.</p> <p>Ensures an interpreter is used for each health encounter.</p>	<p>Actively engages interpreter services and advocates for client language needs in clinical settings.</p> <p>Educates clients of their right to an interpreter for all health encounters.</p>	<p>Promotes awareness and consistent implementation of interpreter policies across healthcare and community sectors.</p> <p>Identifies and addresses systemic barriers to equitable communication, and advocates for service improvements using data and client feedback where gaps exist.</p>

2.2 demonstrates expertise in working with interpreters to effectively communicate with people of refugee-like background

Novice RN	Competent RN	Expert RN (advanced practice)
<p>Promotes a therapeutic environment when working with interpreters.</p> <p>Is aware of the need to brief and debrief the interpreter with each encounter.</p>	<p>Manages the therapeutic environment when working with interpreters by setting engagement standards.</p> <p>Sets engagement standards.</p> <p>Able to brief and debrief the interpreter with each encounter.</p>	<p>Advocates system-wide for the appropriate use of interpreters in standards and practice.</p> <p>Provides education to others on working effectively with interpreters.</p>

Identifies need for and requests appropriate professional interpreter.		
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2.3 creates a safe environment that supports effective communication inclusive of the client, interpreter, physical environment and relevant psychosocial and cultural factors

Novice RN	Competent RN	Expert RN (advanced practice)
<p>Ensures proper conditions, such as closed doors and clear audio for telehealth sessions.</p> <p>Considers factors such as gender, age, dialect and other contextual issues that may impact confidentiality, such as the patient and interpreter being part of the same small language community.</p> <p>Understands the concept and impact of vicarious trauma on interpreters.</p>	<p>Ensures qualified and appropriate interpreter is engaged.</p> <p>Identifies barriers to effective communication, works to resolve them, and escalates unresolved issues appropriately.</p> <p>Terminates sessions that compromise client safety and intervenes to restore a safe communication environment.</p> <p>Debriefs with interpreters and escalates concerns regarding vicarious trauma within the context of the organisation.</p>	<p>Ensures local environment supports effective communication underpinned by procedures and orientation practices.</p> <p>Partners with Interpreter Services to improve interpreter education and service quality.</p> <p>Uses data and client feedback to advocate for appropriate, equitable interpreter access.</p> <p>Investigates and escalates when appropriate interpreters are not available.</p> <p>Ensures staff follow appropriate pre and post debriefing with Interpreters to minimise vicarious trauma.</p>

2.4 assesses and communicates effectively with clients with varying levels of health literacy

Novice RN	Competent RN	Expert RN (advanced practice)
<p>Assesses health literacy and selects appropriate materials (print or digital).</p>	<p>Supports clients to build skills to engage with spoken, written, and digital health information.</p> <p>Understands and works to resolve communication barriers related to varying literacy levels.</p>	<p>Advocates and contributes to the development of additional health resources.</p> <p>Critically appraises and supports access to resources ensuring materials are evidence-based, high-quality,</p>

	<p>Checks for understanding using validated strategies such as “teach-back.”</p> <p>Uses various methods to communicate effectively with clients based on health literacy assessment.</p>	<p>culturally appropriate, and aligned with the health literacy needs of clients.</p> <p>Supports consumer participation in the development, review and evaluation of all health literacy resources.</p>
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Standard 3 - Provides culturally safe, and contextually informed care

Refugee health nurses are knowledgeable and informed regarding the importance of background, context and culture in the provision of services.

The refugee health nurse:

3.1 acknowledges the potential impact of ‘unconscious bias’ on own practice and the delivery of equitable care

Novice RN	Competent RN	Expert RN (advanced practice)
<p>Engages in reflective practice and supervision to critically examine how self-construct (personal background, beliefs, and experiences) may shape care.</p> <p>Applies insights to strengthen cultural safety, equity, and justice in patient care.</p>	<p>Integrates reflective practice and supervision into routine practice.</p> <p>Supports novice nurses in developing reflective skills.</p> <p>Demonstrates awareness of unconscious bias and reflects in a way that avoids reinforcing stereotypes or discriminatory attitudes.</p> <p>Applies insights to strengthen cultural safety, equity, and justice in patient care.</p>	<p>Critically evaluates service delivery environments and policies to reduce the potential impact of unconscious bias.</p> <p>Drives culture change related to clinical supervision.</p> <p>Shapes clinical environments and service models to embed justice, equity, and anti-racist principles in patient care.</p>

3.2 Recognises and responds to the political contexts and global events driving displacement and shaping refugee health and settlement outcomes in Australia.

Novice RN	Competent RN	Expert RN (advanced practice)
<p>Demonstrates understanding of current Australian Government program and policies e.g. the Humanitarian Settlement Program.</p> <p>Demonstrates basic understanding of geopolitical and Australian immigration history and current global affairs.</p>	<p>Expands working knowledge to include other programs e.g. Asylum Seekers, Status Resolution Support Services, Bridging and other visas.</p> <p>Maintains well developed and up-to-date knowledge of geopolitical factors influencing displacement.</p>	<p>Holds in depth knowledge of all relevant Australian Government programs and policies affecting refugee populations.</p> <p>Recognises the historical and systemic inequities that contribute to health disparities and marginalise displaced populations.</p> <p>Utilises a broad range of resources to maintain an in-depth understanding of geopolitical history and is recognised by peers as an expert.</p> <p>Provides briefings on settlement issues and advocacy to support equitable access to health.</p>

3.3 understands trauma related to forced migration and fosters trusting relationships that support safe, therapeutic, and trauma-informed practice

Novice RN	Competent RN	Expert RN (advanced practice)
<p>Understands trauma-informed care terminology and attends relevant education.</p> <p>Understands the health-related impacts of trauma and the importance of therapeutic relationships.</p> <p>Actively engages with clients and patients using open</p>	<p>Applies trauma-informed principles to assessment, care planning and delivery.</p> <p>Applies an intersectional and trauma-informed approach, recognising how overlapping factors shape health service engagement.</p> <p>Adapts care to minimise re-traumatisation, reduce barriers,</p>	<p>Lead the integration of trauma-informed care into service delivery models, orientation, and education of broader health workforce.</p> <p>Ensures local environment is conducive to safe and therapeutic care. Actively advocates when changes are required.</p>

communication and cultural respect.	and support equitable, person-centered care.	Provides supervision to junior staff through reflection, discussion and critical analysis to enhance service delivery.
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**3.4 recognises social determinants, including settlement, as central to health.
Understands systemic barriers and applies a primary health care approach grounded in health and settlement priorities**

Novice RN	Competent RN	Expert RN (advanced practice)
<p>Recognises and understands settlement challenges and systemic biases affecting resettlement.</p> <p>Identifies the core principles of primary health care.</p> <p>Integrates the principles of primary health care into their practice.</p> <p>Understands current national health priorities.</p>	<p>Modifies care plans to accommodate clients' competing settlement priorities</p> <p>Recognises the impact of the social determinants of health on people of refugee-like backgrounds and applies this understanding in nursing care planning and delivery.</p> <p>Recognises the diverse health and social needs of refugee communities. Articulates the various roles and responsibilities of the team in addressing the social determinants of health.</p>	<p>Ensures health remains a settlement priority through communication and assertive follow-up. Advocates for systemic change and contributes to National and local jurisdiction Refugee Health Frameworks.</p> <p>Identifies and responds to the health and social needs of refugee-background communities.</p> <p>Integrates an understanding of the health and social needs of people of refugee-like background into local service delivery design and implementation.</p> <p>Collaborates with government, social services and community sectors to support successful resettlement.</p>

3.5 educates and orientates clients to the Australian health system and promotes understanding of health rights and responsibilities³

Novice RN	Competent RN	Expert RN (advanced practice)
<p>Has a basic understanding of the Australian health care system and is able to inform others.</p> <p>Provides resources on health rights and responsibilities.</p>	<p>Well-developed understanding of the Australian health care system including service pathways for people of refugee-like background.</p> <p>Provides education to the patient on the Australian health care system.</p>	<p>Advocates for equitable care access at local, state or national levels. Investigates instances whereby care is compromised or withheld due to visa status.</p> <p>Advocates for local health system information to be available in required languages in both written and audio-visual media.</p>

Standard 4 - Conducts a comprehensive nursing assessment

Refugee health nurses conduct a comprehensive and holistic assessment utilising a culturally safe* approach to care. The health assessment is conducted for individuals themselves and within the context of their family groups.

The refugee health nurse:

4.1 performs a comprehensive holistic assessment utilising culturally appropriate and evidence-based refugee health recommendations and assessment tools

Novice RN	Competent RN	Expert RN (advanced practice)
<p>Conducts holistic nursing assessments that incorporate an individual’s migration history, physical and mental health, and psychosocial context.</p> <p>Accesses relevant clinical guidelines, including the</p>	<p>Applies clinical skills to undertake more in-depth assessments.</p> <p>Demonstrates deeper understanding of findings and integrates complex information</p>	<p>Leads and mentors others in conducting comprehensive assessments.</p> <p>Synthesises complex health, migration, and psychosocial data to inform service design and system responses.</p>

* There was a conscious decision to use the term cultural safety as it: best represents RHNs recognition of the power relationships between nurses and those in their care; empowers individuals within their health journey and acknowledges that developing cultural safety is a process rather than an end point. This terminology is used by Australian nursing bodies including the Australian College of Nursing.

Australian Society of Infectious Disease (ASID) recommendations for people from refugee backgrounds.	into documentation of assessment.	Shapes models of care to ensure holistic assessment is embedded as standard practice.
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4.2 supports patients and other health professionals in the provision of catch-up immunisation in the context of the local service model

Novice RN	Competent RN	Expert RN (advanced practice)
<p>Is able to review vaccination history to inform catch up immunisation.</p> <p>Understands how to document vaccine history, including how to upload to the Australian Immunisation Register (AIR).</p>	<p>Calculates vaccination catch up schedule as per the Australian Immunisation Handbook.</p> <p>Is an accredited immunisation nurse who maintains competency and professional development.</p>	<p>Provides clinical leadership to maintain compliance with national immunisation policies and strategies.</p> <p>Leads quality and safety activities, including audit and review, to ensure safe vaccine practice and system-wide accountability.</p>

4.3 utilises culturally appropriate resources related to clinical assessment

Novice RN	Competent RN	Expert RN (advanced practice)
<p>Assesses patient understanding and adjusts clinical assessments to respect cultural preferences and needs (e.g. offering a chaperone).</p>	<p>Uses culturally sensitive and validated assessment tools e.g. RHS-15 to support open communication about sensitive topics such as mental health assessment.</p> <p>Approaches health assessment with curiosity and sensitivity, appreciating diverse cultural explanatory models of health and illness to ensure effective communication, assessment and care planning.</p>	<p>Applies contemporary research and best practice Principles.</p> <p>Ensures appropriate resources are locally available and works with key stakeholders to maintain their quality and relevance.</p>

Standard 5 – Effectively plans care that meets individual needs

Individual and families past experiences and length of settlement directly affects their health priorities and goals. Refugee health nurses plan ongoing care in partnership with individuals and families to help achieve long term positive health outcomes. Refugee health nurses use clinical reasoning to interpret assessment findings, prioritise care, plan and implement culturally responsive interventions, and evaluate outcomes for individuals, families, and communities.

The refugee health nurse:

5.1 is knowledgeable of both specialised refugee services and mainstream health services, their access criteria and referral pathways.

Novice RN	Competent RN	Expert RN (advanced practice)
<p>Demonstrates awareness of local specialised refugee mainstream health and social services and uses clinical reasoning with support to link identified needs to appropriate referral pathways.</p> <p>Accesses information about local services and makes appropriate referrals appropriate to assessed priorities, seeking guidance as required.</p>	<p>Identifies referral requirements, using clinical reasoning to interpret assessment findings, prioritise client needs, and select appropriate specialised and mainstream services.</p> <p>Makes timely and appropriate referrals, supports clients to understand and navigate referral processes and facilitates access to translated or culturally appropriate information as required.</p>	<p>Completes appropriate referrals for clients to specialised refugee services</p> <p>Applies advanced clinical reasoning to identify complex referral needs, completing appropriate referrals to specialised refugee and mainstream services for individuals with multifaceted health and psychosocial needs.</p> <p>Audits and maintains referral pathways, advocating for inclusive service access and addressing systemic inequities and access barriers.</p> <p>Contributes to the development of new pathways by building relationships with emerging stakeholders and strengthening service integration and informing system-level improvements.</p>

5.2 Develops a coherent plan of care in collaboration with the client, their family, and other health professionals, and provides follow-up and ongoing support to sustain engagement and positive health outcomes.

Novice RN	Competent RN	Expert RN (advanced practice)
<p>Develops care plan based on assessment and communicates with patients, families, and case managers and other health professionals as required.</p>	<p>Develops comprehensive, flexible care plans sensitive to settlement needs, facilitates implementation and follow-up.</p>	<p>Identifies complex care needs, develops comprehensive long-term care plans, and actively advocates to ensure care is appropriately prioritised.</p> <p>Provides ongoing system-level advocacy for health as a foundational element of settlement, influences policy and service design, and contributes to state and national refugee health frameworks.</p>

5.3 Uses translated resources and care planning tools to support communication with clients, families, and other health professionals, ensuring care plans are accessible, culturally appropriate, and actionable.

Novice RN	Competent RN	Expert RN (advanced practice)
<p>Accesses and uses translated resources and basic planning tools (e.g. appointment translation tools) to support client understanding of care plans.</p>	<p>Adapts and applies translated materials and care planning tools to meet client needs and facilitate communication with other health professionals.</p> <p>Advocates within the local service for consistent use of language access tools in care planning and coordination and identifies emerging needs among newly arrived communities that require new or adapted planning resources.</p>	<p>Leads development, evaluation, and promotion of accessible care planning tools and resources across services.</p> <p>Advocates for system-wide adoption of language access tools in care planning across health care sectors, using early engagement with newly arrived communities to identify emerging needs and embed equitable practice.</p>

Standard 6 – Actively engages in health education and promotion

The provision of health education and health promotion is embedded into refugee health nursing practice. Every activity provides opportunities to assist individuals and communities to improve their health through education and building health literacy skills⁴. Refugee health nurses also engage in health promotion activities in partnership with communities, which lead to control over and improvement in health through a wide range of social and environmental interventions.

The refugee health nurse:

6.1 Understands the impact of a person’s health beliefs, biases, and behaviours on health education and promotion, and advocates for the development and translation of appropriate resources and tools to support effective, culturally responsive care.

Novice RN	Competent RN	Expert RN (advanced practice)
<p>Recognises that diverse health beliefs shape education needs.</p> <p>Uses active listening and “teach-back” to confirm understanding.</p>	<p>Adapts health education and promotion strategies by considering individual circumstances, cultural explanatory models, and varying levels of health literacy.</p> <p>Engages in open, respectful dialogue about health beliefs and biases to support meaningful understanding and informed decision-making.</p>	<p>Leads the development and evaluation of culturally responsive health education resources for emerging and established communities, ensuring consumer involvement and lived experience guide identification of needs and design.</p> <p>Builds sector-wide capacity by educating health staff, settlement services, and government agencies to enhance cross-sector cultural responsiveness.</p> <p>Demonstrates self-awareness of own biases and health beliefs and their impact on care delivery and works through these with clients to deliver equitable and effective health education and promotion.</p>

6.2 Introduces and reinforces understanding of preventative health and screening across the lifespan through ongoing education.

Novice RN	Competent RN	Expert RN (advanced practice)
<p>Explains preventative health screening and provides referrals e.g. sexual and reproductive health screening, bowel cancer screening.</p> <p>Accesses and uses translated or pictorial materials to support client understanding.</p>	<p>Facilitates preventative screening, adapts culturally appropriate resources, and ensures comprehension through strategies like teach-back.</p>	<p>Implements and supports local screening initiatives, trains staff and embeds culturally appropriate resources into service delivery.</p>

6.3 partners with key community and/or bilingual educators to facilitate community engagement and health promotion.

Novice RN	Competent RN	Expert RN (advanced practice)
<p>Attends community education sessions as an observer.</p>	<p>Co-presents with community or bilingual educators in health promotion sessions.</p>	<p>Leads the development of culturally appropriate health promotion resources and participates as a subject matter expert in community education.</p>

Standard 7- Advocates for equitable health access and self determination

Refugee health nurses are well placed to help shape policy and influence service delivery through their leadership and vision. Refugee health nurses acknowledge and respect the strength and resilience of people from refugee backgrounds and recognise vulnerability and as such advocate on their behalf.

The refugee health nurse:

7.1 utilises the social determinants of health as a basis for advocacy.

Novice RN	Competent RN	Expert RN (advanced practice)
<p>Understands social determinants of health and the local context in which people live, recognises their impact on refugee health and settlement, and begins applying this understanding in advocacy.</p> <p>Acknowledges the importance of a strengths-based approach alongside awareness of vulnerabilities.</p>	<p>Applies knowledge of social determinants and their intersectionality in care planning, using a strengths-based approach to recognise resilience as well as vulnerability.</p> <p>Advocates within the local service to address barriers and promote equitable access to health and settlement supports.</p>	<p>Provides leadership and system-level advocacy to embed social determinants and their intersectional impacts in refugee health and settlement policy and service design.</p> <p>Models and promotes a strengths-based approach grounded in both resilience and vulnerability.</p>

7.2 upholds and communicates client rights and responsibilities within the Australian health care system.

Novice RN	Competent RN	Expert RN (advanced practice)
<p>Understands and explains basic rights and responsibilities, including informed consent, using language-specific resources.</p>	<p>Provides education on broader rights and responsibilities (e.g. second opinion, withdrawal of consent, age of consent) and ensures clients can exercise them.</p> <p>Provides advocacy for individual patients when rights are compromised.</p>	<p>Advocates for equitable recognition of refugee patient rights across the health system and leads education for staff and partners on rights and responsibilities.</p>

7.3 Recognises access issues and actively works to empower and overcome access barriers.

Novice RN	Competent RN	Expert RN (advanced practice)
<p>Identifies common access barriers experienced by people of refugee-like background.</p> <p>Understands how resilience and vulnerability influence health access.</p>	<p>Plans and adapts care to address access barriers, applying a strengths-based approach to empower individuals and families while recognising vulnerabilities.</p> <p>Advocates within the local service for accessible care pathways.</p>	<p>Leads state and national advocacy to embed equity, human rights, and access in policy and service delivery.</p> <p>Applies a strengths-based approach, elevating resilience while recognising vulnerability, to challenge access barriers and shape reforms for equitable health access and self-determination.</p>

7.4 Builds capacity in the wider workforce by engaging with refugee communities.

Novice RN	Competent RN	Expert RN (advanced practice)
<p>Contributes to capacity building within the local health service.</p>	<p>Supports capacity building across wider sectors (e.g. education, housing, human services).</p>	<p>Leads workforce development in refugee health issues at state and national levels through networks, training, and policy forums.</p>

7.5 Promotes and provides opportunities for the health workforce to develop skills in refugee health.

Novice RN	Competent RN	Expert RN (advanced practice)
<p>Acts as buddy for student nurses on placement.</p>	<p>Supervises students and novice nurses, demonstrating evidence-based refugee health practice.</p>	<p>Acts as a role model, contributes to curriculum development, and advises on refugee health content in education programs.</p>

References

1. Refugee Nurses of Australia. Standards of practice for Australian refugee health nurses. Australia: Refugee Nurses of Australia; 2018.
2. Nursing and Midwifery Board of Australia. Registered nurse standards for practice [Internet]. Canberra: NMBA; 2016 [cited 2026 May 5]. Available from: <https://www.nursingmidwiferyboard.gov.au/Codes-Guidelines-Statements/Professional-standards/registered-nurse-standards-for-practice.aspx>
3. Australian Commission on Safety and Quality in Health Care. Australian Charter of Healthcare Rights [Internet]. Canberra: ACSQHC; 2019 [cited 2026 May 5]. Available from: <https://www.safetyandquality.gov.au/national-priorities/charter-of-healthcare-rights/>
4. World Health Organization. Health promotion [Internet]. Geneva: WHO; [date unknown] [cited 2026 May 5]. Available from: <https://www.who.int/health-topics/health-promotion>