

Can a Master's degree in advanced clinical practice clarify the UK multiple sclerosis nurse specialist as an advanced practice role

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Introduction

- In 2011 the Clinical Nurse Specialist (CNS) for Multiple Sclerosis (MS) in the UK was considered one of the most advanced in Europe (Hartung, et al., 2011). However, there is little evidence in the literature to suggest UK MS nurses meet advanced level nursing standards nationally as defined by Health Education England (HEE) (2017), Royal College of Nursing (RCN) (2018), and internationally as defined by the International Council of Nurses (ISON) (2020).
- In the UK there is variance in practice amongst UK MS nurses including educational level, title, experience and scope of practice with no consistent regulation. In addition, there are no defined educational or career pathways allowing professional growth within the role from novice to expert and to enable optimal individual scopes of practice.
- Current UK CNS MS education is focused on speciality nursing, symptom management and increasingly complex disease modifying drugs (DMD's) (Burke, et al., 2011, Peloquin, et al., 2021).
- Education to Master's level and those holding a qualification in non-medical prescribing in UK MS nurses remains low in practice. Less than 20% of UK MS Specialist nurses had undertaken non-medical prescribing training and less than 10% advanced practitioner training within the last three years. (Roberts, Chico, and Naik., 2021),

Aims

To identify variations in practice of the CNS MS UK and consider whether following a post graduate pathway in advanced clinical practice can reduce role variance, optimise scope of practice, and clarify practice at an advanced level.

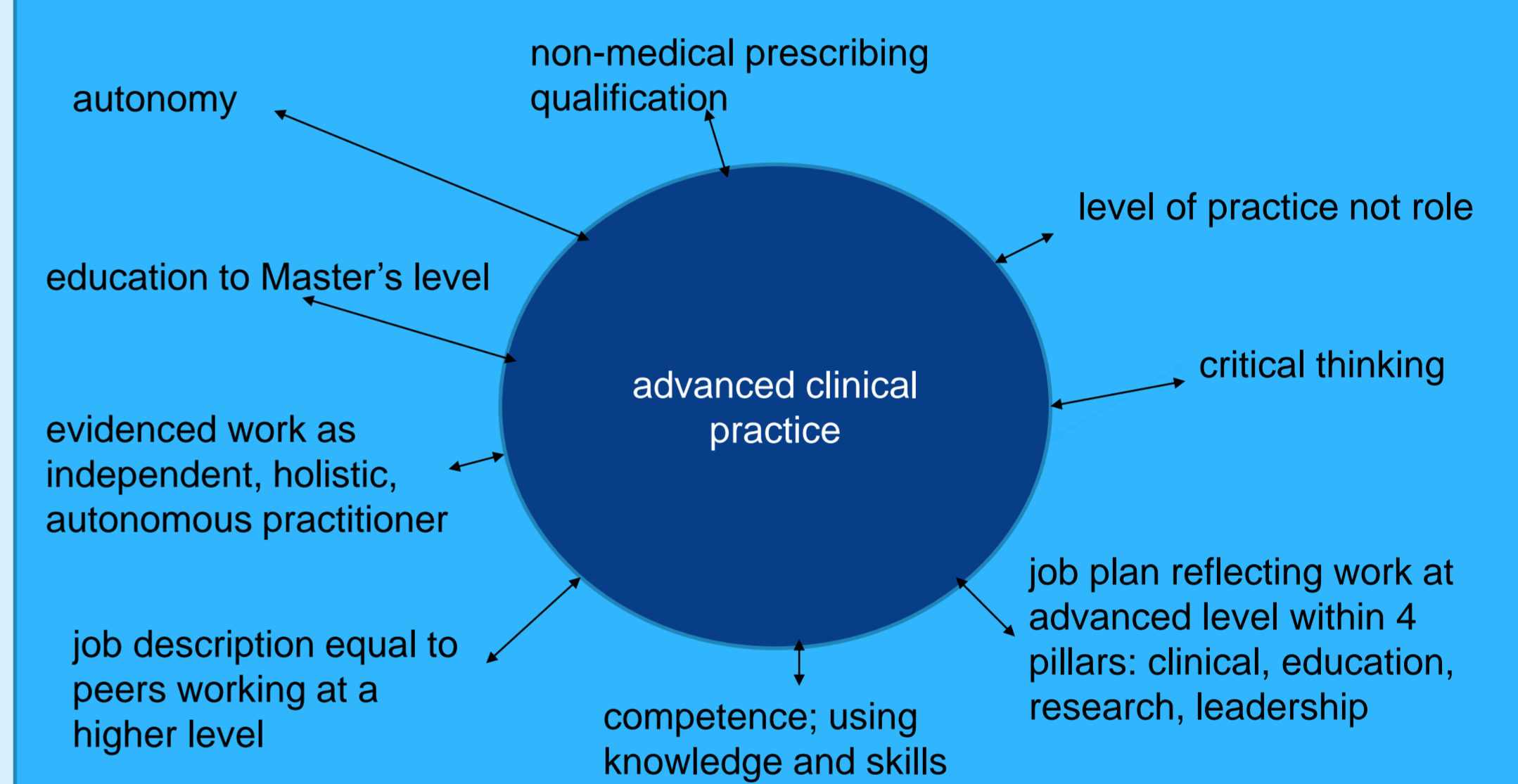
Methods

A literature search was carried out using a systematic approach. The search was limited to 2011-2021 and the English language. The search focused on the role of the CNS MS, advanced practice, and education. A total of 10 articles, primary studies comprising of mixed methodology, incorporating both qualitative, quantitative and mixed method research were selected as relevant to critically analyse and discuss findings.

Advanced Clinical Practice

"Advanced clinical practice is delivered by experienced, registered health and care practitioners. It is a level of practice characterised by a high degree of autonomy and complex decision making. This is underpinned by a Master's level award or equivalent that encompasses the four pillars of clinical practice, leadership and management, education and research, with demonstration of core capabilities and area specific clinical competence..." (Health Education England, 2017).

- National policy supports advanced practice; HEE (2017), RCN (2018), The NHS Long Term Plan (2019).
- Expanded scope of practice can be achieved by gaining qualifications in prescribing and advanced clinical assessment.



Results/Discussion

The literature demonstrated six recurrent themes:

Variation in practice:

- Little progress has been made in reducing variation within roles including title, pay band, experience and qualification, leading to lack of understanding of roles and, difficulty within organisations in identifying accurately the numbers of nurses working at an advanced level.
- Variation in practice is influenced by ad hoc development of advanced practice roles in relation to changing needs of the NHS, different models of service provision and varying levels of practice and without clear definition, boundaries, governance or regulation.
- Despite medication management being a common intervention in MS nurse practice less than a quarter of MS nurses have a qualification in non-medical prescribing.

Current workforce considerations:

- The CNS workforce is mostly experienced and mature, however education to Master's level is low in practice.
- There are no defined numbers of MS nurses in the UK practicing at an advanced level making it difficult to accurately perceive advanced practice needs of the existing work force and to develop specific educational strategies.
- A significant number of MS nurses are planning retirement in next 5 years, others are looking for alternative roles; the loss of large numbers of experienced nurses highlights the importance of future succession planning, training and development.
- Consideration needs to be given to carefully structured career pathways reflecting different needs of the UK MS specialist workforce taking into account experience and skill mix within teams, with education at Master's level in advanced practice a goal.
- Careful thought needs to be given to experienced individuals who give great value in terms of existing knowledge, service delivery and skills; change should not be enforced risking further workforce challenges.

Benefits of Master's level education:

- Enhanced clinical and professional credibility which the ISON (2020) recognise as essential to providing safe, high-quality optimal care through improved "academic rigor, scientific reasoning and critical thinking".
- Has a positive effect on practice at a higher level across the four pillars of advanced practice.
- Understanding of the research process and the benefits of experiencing the research process is important and improved after completing Master's level education.
- Additional personal and organisational benefits include increased confidence, increased clinical skills, innovation and sharing knowledge.

Training and development needs of nurse specialists:

- There is no current research available to provide an accurate picture of the current academic levels of UK MS nurses.
- There is an desire demonstrated for further education due to the high numbers accessing education sessions provided by charities, professional organisations and pharmaceutical companies.
- Perceived further training needs of nurses working at an advanced level included history taking, prescribing, research and audit, leadership and management.

Enablers to practice:

- Motivation and desire for learning to improve clinical skills and practice, career development, to develop professionally and personally and to gain job security to support dependants.
- Passing assignments, constructive feedback, peer support, increased understanding of complex issues in practice and research language enabled students to gain confidence.

Barriers and challenges to role:

- Advanced practice activity and lack of ability to practice to full scope were a common theme throughout the literature at a personal and organisational level.
- Barriers included time restraints, lack of resources and funding, large caseloads, poor capacity, lone working and lack of managerial support.
- Recognition of a mature and experienced workforce and the considerable changes in nurse training over the past three decades suggesting prior learning may not have been at a higher level leading to self-doubt, poor confidence and fear of failure.

Conclusion

- Variation in the UK MS nurse role is ongoing with undefined titles, education levels and scope of practice.
- Achievement of Master's level education in advanced clinical practice alone would not clarify the CNS MS as an advanced practice role (Fig. 1).
- Education to Master's level appears to have a positive impact on advanced level activity benefiting individuals, patients, services and organisations.
- A qualification in prescribing and advanced clinical assessment would enhance the scope of practice of MS nurses.
- Challenges and barriers to development in practice exist and require consideration.
- Further work is required to clarify existing variations in practice, identify clear titles within MS teams related to level of practice, qualifications and competency.
- In addition, job descriptions and career pathways need to be defined and organisations need to work towards reducing barriers to enable role development maximising optimal scopes of practice.

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