Australian College of Neonatal Nurses Incorporated (INC1300211)

Clinical Ladder for Neonatal Nurses

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Version Control

The ACNN (INC1300211) Clinical Ladder for Neonatal Nurses 2025 will remain current until 2030 (5 years) or earlier when modifications are required.

Authors

Initiated by: ACNN National Executive Committee

Clinical ladders - background

Clinical ladder tools offer an opportunity to promote best-practice, enhance professional development, recognise clinical expertise and increase nurse satisfaction.

Many clinical ladders are based on Benner's 'novice to expert' model, focusing on development of nurses through stages of practice, skill and capability. Using this kind of model allows nurses to sharpen their skills and patient care expertise across a continuum.

This tool provides a framework, based on the Standards for Practice for Neonatal Nurses (2025), that enables nurses and managers to recognise broad levels of achievement and set professional goals and objectives for the coming year.

Ideally, the clinical ladder is used in conjunction with a local Professional Development Review (PDR) process. The manager and neonatal nurse discuss the nurse's progress on the ladder, reviewing achievements and successes. In consideration of reaching the next level of the ladder, the manager and neonatal nurse identify activities and practices that assist in progression and advancement.

1.1 Use of the clinical ladder for neonatal nurses tool

Each level of the clinical ladder builds on prior completed levels and provides a framework for continuous professional development.

References

Leamon, M., Zedreck-Gonzalez, J., Coe, P., & Fennimore, L. (2023). A Roadmap to a Comprehensive Evaluation of a Clinical Ladder Program. *The Journal of nursing administration,* 53(2), 104-109.

Slagle, A., Wakim, N., & Gray, S. (2023) A global examination of clinical ladder programs – a synthesis of commonalities and opportunities for standardization. *Worldviews on Evidence-Based Nursing*, 20 (1).

Clinical Level	Requirements	Achieved (A)	Working Towards (WT)
Novice – Advanced Beginner	New Graduate or 'new to specialty'	☐	☐
	Successful completion of unit-based orientation	☐	☐
	Provides beginning neonatal nursing clinical skills, contributes to plan of care, basic communication skills with families, and developing time-management skills	☐	☐
	Starts to interpret situations, rather than individual parts	☐	☐
	Complies with protocols, pathways and documentation requirements	☐	☐
	Displays approachability, integrity and trust and decision-making skills	☐	☐
	Active participation in continuing education – locally offered & online	☐	☐
	Assumes responsibility for own professional development documentation	☐	☐
	Awareness of professional organisations and resources available	☐	☐
Competent	Registered Nurse with basic level of neonatal experience	☐	☐
	Provides competent neonatal nursing clinical skills, integrates multidisciplinary recommendations into care plan, developing communication skills with families, and competent time management ability	☐	☐
	Develops a sense of mastery and can manage routine situations with confidence	☐	☐
	Serving as preceptor for students/new graduates – developing leadership skills at basic level	☐	☐
	Active participation in continuing education – external	☐	☐
	Attends clinical improvement project groups/meetings (journal club, reviewing guidelines)	☐	☐
	Begins membership of professional organisation	☐	☐
Proficient	Registered Nurse with several years of neonatal experience	☐	☐
	Post-graduate certification in Neonatal Specialty (or working towards completion)	☐	☐
	Provides proficiency in neonatal nursing clinical skills, incorporates varying levels of acuity into nursing care priorities, adapts care to available evidence	☐	☐
	Interprets situations, understanding the nuances of patient care and makes decisions based on experience and intuition	☐	☐
	Developing leadership skills at intermediate level - serving as Team Leader (or equivalent role)	☐	☐
	Developing & presenting continuing education – locally	☐	☐
	Actively participates in development of clinical improvement projects (writing guidelines, conducting literature reviews, assisting with audits)	☐	☐
	Maintains membership of professional organisation	☐	☐

Expert – Advanced Practitioner	Registered Nurse with more than 4 years neonatal experience (when working full time)	☐	☐
	Post-graduate Masters in Neonatal Specialty (or working towards completion)	☐	☐
	Provides advanced neonatal nursing skills and highly skilled critical thinking in complex patient care, tailors evidence-based care to individual family needs	☐	☐
	Possesses a high level of expertise in anticipation of patient needs, making decisions quickly and effectively	☐	☐
	Has sound conflict management and problem-solving skills	☐	☐
	Acts as role model for other levels of nursing staff	☐	☐
	Developing & presenting continuing education or research findings at external conferences/seminars	☐	☐
	Identifies need for, and initiates and organises clinical improvement projects (conducts audits, develops programs aimed at improvement of practice and patient outcomes, reviews patient care delivery)	☐	☐
	Consistently reads and reviews evidence to inform practice	☐	☐
	Assumes leadership roles locally and/or within professional organisations	☐	☐

Manager – Neonatal Nurse discussion/feedback/goals:

Date: _____

Manager name: _____ **Manager signature:** _____

Nurse name: _____ **Nurse signature:** _____