Licensed practical nurses (ˈli-licensed ˈprac-ti-cal ˈnur-ses) provide routine nursing and healthcare treatments and personal care to sick, injured, convalescent, or disabled people.

Licensed practical nurses play an important role in the modern healthcare team and system. These nurses provide support and assistance to registered nurses and doctors. They have close relationships with patients. They are instrumental in providing healthcare services in hospitals, nursing homes, clinics, and home care settings.

Practical nursing began as an informal trade which was learned, as the name implies, through practical experience. However, in 1938, New York State passed the first law requiring practical nurses to be licensed. Shortly after, the Young Women’s Christian League began an eight week training program in New York City. Today, all fifty states have requirements for training and licensing of practical nurses.

Work Performed
Licensed practical nurses (LPNs), or licensed vocational nurses (LVNs) as they are called in California and Texas, work under the direction of a registered nurse, physician, or dentist. They give nursing care that requires technical knowledge and skill, not the in-depth professional education of registered nurses.

Much of the hands-on bedside care of patients is the responsibility of licensed practical nurses. They take and record the patients’ temperature, blood pressure, pulse rate, and respiration rate. They respond to the patients’ call-bells, attend to their needs, and make them comfortable. They observe the patients and watch for any changes in symptoms, reactions to medicines, or changes in the patients’ condition. LPNs help patients bathe, dress, or go to the bathroom. They report to the supervisory staff in charge.

Noteworthy Quote:
“If you want to be a licensed practical nurse, you have to do it for the love of the job. Besides having the education, you must be a truly caring person. In order to be a good nurse, you can’t just perform the duties; you have to put your heart into meeting the emotional needs of your patients and their families as well.”
–Karen Wilbur, LPN, Cortland, New York

Licensed practical nurses provide routine nursing and healthcare treatments and personal care to sick, injured, convalescent, or disabled people. Photo by CGP
Licensed practical nurses also carry out other designated nursing procedures. They may administer certain medications, prepare and give injections, and insert urinary drainage catheters. Their duties may include collecting samples from patients for testing such as urinalysis and blood glucose tests. They may also dress wounds or apply compresses and heat or cold therapies.

Some LPNs work in a special department such as a burn unit, an intensive care ward, an operating room, or an obstetric unit. In the obstetrics department, for instance, LPNs help feed and bathe newborns, and give care to new mothers. In these assignments, their duties sometimes require complex procedures and the use of precision instruments and equipment, which may require additional on-the-job training or continuing education courses.

Other LPNs work in clinics and in the offices of physicians and dentists. They measure and record patients’ weights, blood pressure, temperature, and respiratory rate, and prepare patients for examination. They apply dressings to wounds, and explain health measures. These LPNs may make appointments, keep records, and carry out other clerical duties.

Many LPNs work in nursing homes and extended care facilities. In addition to offering routine bedside care, they may help address the residents’ needs, participate in development of care plans, assist in the supervising of nursing aides and orderlies, and dispense medications to patients. They may also assist in the rehabilitation of patients with disabilities by helping them follow a program of exercises to regain a normal range of motion, to prevent deformities, or acquire strength.

Many LPNs work in the homes of patients, where they do private duty nursing and can work more independently. In these assignments, in addition to providing healthcare for their patients, they may cook meals, keep patient rooms in order, and see that the patients are comfortable and in good spirits. They may show other family members how to do some simple nursing tasks.

LPNs are generally in an ideal position to offer emotional comfort and understanding to patients and their families. Because they are in such close contact with patients, they can assist their patients with activities of daily living and encourage them in appropriate self-care activities.

**Working Conditions**

Much of an LPN’s work takes place indoors, in places that are relatively secure. Most LPNs work in hospitals and nursing homes, but others work in offices, community centers, schools, or in patient’s homes.

When caring for patients, LPNs are often walking, standing, reaching, bending, and stretching. They may lift patients or help them bathe, sit up, get out of bed, or walk. Caring for very ill or injured people can be stressful. They may deal with patients who are confused, moody, or uncooperative.

LPNs may care for individuals with communicable diseases such as flu and tuberculosis. They follow strict hand washing and other infection control guidelines in every setting. Standardized guidelines and protective devices help protect nurses from getting these diseases, as well as exposure to radiation, chemicals, and gases.

**Hours and Earnings**

Hospitals and other healthcare centers usually offer full-time LPNs a forty-hour work week. However, patients in hospitals and nursing care facilities require round-the-clock care, so LPNs may work different shifts and may rotate from one shift to another. Hours may also include work on weekends and holidays, and overtime is common in some facilities to maintain proper patient coverage. Hours of duty for LPNs who work in patients’ homes are scheduled to meet the needs of patients and their families. This may require them to work irregular hours. About 19 percent of LPNs work part-time.

Earnings vary with experience and time on the job, the kind of duty, employer, and geographic location. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, in 2007, the average wage for LPNs was $18.72 an hour. Overall, wages ranged anywhere from around $13 an hour to well over $25 an hour. In general, those working in employment services, home health-care services, and nursing care facilities made more than those in doctors’ offices and hospitals (with the exception of large metropolitan hospitals). However, non-traditional employers, including pharmaceutical wholesalers, computer systems design and related services, and insurance agencies, tended to pay the highest wages.

Full-time licensed practical nurses usually receive medical insurance, paid holiday and sick leave, overtime pay or equivalent time off, and pension benefits. Some employers offer free laundry service for uniforms, and some offer meals at no cost. Many also help employees improve their skills and advance through staff development programs and/or tuition reimbursement for continuing education.

**Education and Training**

A high school education or its equivalent is almost always required for entrance into a program of training for practical nurses. Some programs are designed as part of a high school curriculum. Although many schools of practical nursing do not require specific high school courses for admission, students will find taking biology and chemistry courses helpful. Students with a broad general education and wide-ranging interests will be well-prepared to complete the academic work and the clinical practice required in training.

In order to take the examination required for licensing, candidates must be graduates of a school of practical nursing approved by a state board of nursing or other regulatory body. In 2006, there were more than 1,500 state-approved training programs in practical nursing. Most programs are found in technical or vocational schools, and two-year community and junior colleges. Some high schools, hospitals, and a few four-year colleges and universities also offer programs in practical nursing.

Applicants for admission to a program of training usually must pass a health examination. Many programs require an
Licensing, Certification, Unions and Professional Societies

All states and the District of Columbia require practical nurses to be licensed. Nurses must graduate from a state-approved program of study and training, and pass the national written examination (NCLEX-PN) before they may use the title licensed practical nurse. The exam is developed and administered by the National Council of State Boards of Nursing. The exam covers safe and effective care environment; health promotion and maintenance; psychosocial integrity; and physiological integrity.

Licensed practical nurses in hospitals and other healthcare settings may be members of a union representing the staff. It may be the same union that represents registered professional nurses.

Several professional organizations represent LPNs and offer services to them. They support and promote the advancement of practical nursing through the collection and distribution of valuable and timely clinical, research, and legislative information, and by offering numerous networking, educational, and certification opportunities and services.

Some groups also offer certification programs to those who meet additional training, experience, and testing requirements. The National Federation of Licensed Practical Nurses (NFLPN) offers certification programs in IV therapy and gerontology. The National Association for Practical Nurse Education & Service (NAPNES) offers certification programs in pharmacology and long-term care.

LPNs may also belong to the National League for Nursing (NLN), which is open to registered or practical nurses, nurses’ aides, allied health workers, and others. It is particularly active in evaluating and accrediting nursing programs to ensure that students in these programs receive quality education.

Personal Qualifications

LPNs should have a caring, sympathetic nature. They should have patience, compassion, and emotional stability. They must keep an objective point of view. They also need excellent observational and communications skills. They must be good listeners and be able to correctly interpret both the verbal and nonverbal messages of patients, and know when to notify a registered nurse or physician of a patient’s special needs.

Licensed practical nurses must be alert. The ability to take correct action, quickly and decisively, in everyday work and in emergencies is essential. LPNs must also be in good health, and have the stamina to keep pace with the emotional and physical demands of the work. Most employing agencies require job candidates to pass a physical examination as a condition of employment. The examination may include testing for communicable diseases and drug use.

Occupations can be adapted for workers with disabilities. Persons should contact their school or employment counselors, their state office of vocational rehabilitation, or their state department of labor to explore fully their individual needs and requirements as well as the requirements of the occupation.

Where Employed

Licensed practical nurses hold more than 749,000 jobs throughout the United States. About 26 percent of them work in hospitals. Nursing care facilities employ 26 percent. Another 12 percent work in physicians’ offices. Many licensed practical nurses are also employed in home health-care services.

A growing number of LPNs use the services of a nurses’ registry or employment agency that contracts with employers for temporary assignments. Other employers include rehabilitation centers, psychiatric centers, outpatient care centers, community care facilities, public and private educational services, correctional institutions, the Armed Forces, and other federal, state, and local government agencies. A few LPNs are self-employed, working directly for patients or their families.

Employment Outlook

The general growth of healthcare and the long-term care needs of a rapidly growing and aging population will increase the demand for LPNs. The Bureau of Labor Statistics projects employment of LPNs to grow by 14.04 percent through the year 2016—an increase of roughly 105,000 jobs. An additional 204,000 positions are also expected to open due to replacement needs.

Most new jobs for licensed practical nurses will be in nursing homes and in establishments for persons who need long-term care. The demand for LPNs to deliver home health-care services is also expected to increase much faster.
than the average employment rate. This demand will occur because of consumer preference for care in the home, and technological advances that make it possible to deliver increasingly complex treatments in the home.

Doctor’s offices, clinics, and outpatient care centers such as ambulatory, surgical, and emergency medical centers will continue to provide opportunities for LPNs. The demand for their services will particularly increase as more and more procedures that were once performed only in hospitals become routine in these facilities.

**Entry Methods**

Newly licensed LPNs may find help finding employment from their schools’ career services offices. They may be offered a part-time or full-time job with the hospital where they did their clinical training. Networking among staff may uncover other job leads to explore.

Qualified LPNs may apply at local employment agencies or follow up on newspaper want ads. They may apply directly at hospitals. Other openings may be available at home health-care agencies or at nursing homes. Some hospitals and large care facilities hold recruitment and employment fairs. Most professional nursing associations offer a registry or an employment service. Those who plan to do independent private duty nursing may be able to sign up with a hospital registry or with a physician’s office.

**Advancement**

In general, advancement takes the form of salary increases. Some licensed practical nurses with experience may advance to management work. In some settings, such as nursing homes, they may direct other LPNs and nursing assistants. Licensed practical nurses may advance by taking further training for special services. Some hospitals, for example, offer programs that teach LPNs to do kidney dialysis, or to work with patients in cardiac or intensive care units.

Licensed practical nurses may choose to become registered nurses (RNs). Numerous schools offering associate and bachelor degrees in nursing have programs designed for advancement of practical nurses. These schools give full or almost full credit for practical nursing education, and offer additional training for the completion of an associate or bachelor degree in nursing. Graduates of these accredited programs are eligible for the registered nurse examination.

With further training, LPNs may also choose to become instructors or administrative personnel in schools of nursing. Others may work as consultants and sales representatives for pharmaceutical wholesalers, computer systems design and related services, and insurance agencies and brokerage firms.

**For Further Research**


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