Defining Sexual and Reproductive Health

Sexual and reproductive health (SRH) care is sometimes thought of narrowly as maternal-child, family planning, or women's health care, but the World Health Organization (WHO) has defined it more broadly as:

“a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity, in all matters relating to the reproductive system and to its function and processes. Reproductive health therefore implies that people are able to have a satisfying and safe sex life and that they have the capacity to reproduce and the freedom to decide if, when and how often to do so” (2011, p. viii).

A number of national health systems have sought to operationalize this definition as a minimum package of SRH care accessible to all people that includes: sexual health promotion; preconception care; contraception, pregnancy and unplanned pregnancy care; women’s health/common gynecology care; genitourinary conditions of men; and assessment of specialty gynecology problems, including infertility; delivered within a system of public health and primary care services. R¹N endorses this definition of SRH and is working to promote its implementation in the US.

Reproductive Health in Nursing (R¹N) was formed by a group of nurse clinicians, educators, scholars, and activists who came to know each other through their common efforts to build on nursing’s legacy of providing sexual and reproductive health (SRH) care and promoting social justice and health equity. R¹N’s leadership and support staff team includes: Molly Battistelli, MPH; Joyce Cappiello, PhD, FNP, FAANP; Amy Levi, PhD, CNM, WHNP-BC; Monica McLemore, PhD, MPH, RN; Kathy Simmonds, PhD(c), MPH, WHNP-BC; Diana Taylor, PhD, RN, MS; Program Coordinator Samantha Andrews, and Organizational Development Consultant Mary Dickow. R¹N’s vision is of a world where all people have access to high quality sexual and reproductive health care including abortion; and nurses are recognized, supported and celebrated as essential members of the health workforce, who can make this vision a reality. Below, we offer a brief history to contextualize how and why R¹N came to be.

A New Wave of Nursing Activism and Leadership in SRH: 1960s-1990s

In response to high national maternal and infant mortality rates, physician shortages, and lack of attention to sexual health overall, nurses and midwives established birth centers and feminist health centers, got training through Planned Parenthood to provide contraception, treat sexually transmitted infections, and promote sexual health, and engaged in SRH-focused policy efforts in the 1960s and ’70s. Political backlash in the 1980s led to cuts in funding for healthcare, family planning, and abortion services that negatively impacted many of these programs and SRH delivery sites, and the clients who received care from them.

In resistance to these funding cuts and the growing politicization of women’s health, abortion and SRH services, nurses started a number of initiatives in the ‘90s, including Clinicians for Choice (a project of the National Abortion Federation); the Advanced Practice Clinician (APC) Initiative; the Reproductive Options Education (ROE) Consortium for Nursing (a project of the Abortion Access Project, now Provide);
and the first fledgling chapters of Nursing Students for Choice (now Nursing Students for Sexual and Reproductive Health). R*N’s founders were central in establishing and growing all of these initiatives.

Digging In: 2000-2015

In addition to continuing to work with the organizations mentioned above, R*N’s founders took on leadership roles and spearheaded SRH-related efforts within a number of other interprofessional and reproductive rights and justice groups in the new millennium, including:

- Advancing New Standards in Reproductive Health (ANSIRH)
- Association for Health Professionals (ARHP), including the SRH Workforce Project
- American Academy of Nursing/American Nurses Association, including the Women’s Health Expert Panel
- American College Nurse Midwives (ACNM), including establishing a caucus of Midwives in support of Sexual and Reproductive Health and Abortion
- American Public Health Association (APHA), including in the Population, Reproductive and Sexual Health and Public Health Nursing sections
- Center for Reproductive Rights
- CoreAlign
- National Organization of Nurse Practitioner Faculties, including formation of a SRH Special Interest Group
- National Women’s Law Center
- Association of Women’s Health Obstetric and Neonatal Nurses (AWHONN)
- Society for Family Planning
- Sister Song
- Sea Change Program
- IfWhenHow (formerly Law Students for Reproductive Justice)
- And more...

During these years, they also led a number of research, policy, scholarly and educational endeavors, generating a body of essential evidence, literature, teaching and learning tools, and sparking legislative changes relevant to nurses and SRH.

Bringing Nurses and SRH Care To A New Level: 2015-present

After many years of working individually and collaboratively to advance SRH and abortion care, these nursing thought leaders and clinician-activists came together to plan next steps for increasing the capacity, visibility, and awareness of nurses as vital providers of SRH and abortion care in the US. Recognizing that nurses who are committed to patient-centered sexual and reproductive health care needed a home, Reproductive Health in Nursing (R*N) was founded in 2015. To learn more about this history and about R*N, or to access our repository of nursing-focused SRH and abortion resources, visit the R*N website, www.rhnursing.org.

The following is a selected list of publications by the R*N leadership team:
Bibliography of Selected Publications on SRH and abortion by RhN Leaders, 1997-present (listed chronologically)


Journal of Obstetrics Gynecology and Neonatal Nursing InFocus Series. [expected publication November 2017]

- Cappiello, J., Coplon, L., & Carpenter, H. Sexual and reproductive health initiatives in pre-licensure education.
- Levi, A. Sexual and reproductive health in nursing education
- McLemore, M., & Levi, A. Expanding access to sexual and reproductive health services through nursing education.
- Simmonds, K., Hewitt, C.M., Atzlan-James, E.A., & Skinner, E. Pathways to competence in sexual and reproductive health for Advanced Practice Nurses.