ISSN: 3069-0641

International Journal of Nursing & Healthcare

Review Article

Professionalism in Nursing and the Appropriate Use of Nursing Credentials: A Mini Literature Review

Abigail Mitchell DHEd, MSN, MBA, RN, CNE, CGNC, FHERDSA* and Malena Jones PhD, MBA, RN, CNE

D'Youville University, Buffalo, New Yok, USA.

KEYWORDS

Nursing, Professionalism, Credentials, Professional growth.

Corresponding Author Information

Abigail Mitchell DHEd, MSN, MBA, RN, CNE, CGNC, FHERDSA

D'Youville University, Buffalo, New Yok, USA.

Received: December 20, 2025; **Accepted:** January 30, 2026; **Published:** February 12, 2026

Citation: Abigail Mitchell, Malena Jones. Professionalism in Nursing and the Appropriate Use of Nursing Credentials: A Mini Literature Review. Int J Nurs Health Care. 2026; 2(1):1-4.

Professionalism and Credentialing in Nursing

Professionalism in nursing is widely recognized as essential to safe, ethical, and high-quality care. It reflects not only what nurses do, but how they think, communicate, and represent themselves within the profession. Professionalism encompasses shared values, behaviors, and standards that guide nursing practice across clinical, educational, and leadership settings. One visible and often overlooked expression of professionalism is the accurate use of nursing credentials, which communicates education, licensure, and advanced preparation to patients, colleagues, and healthcare organizations. When used correctly, credentials support professional identity and help maintain public trust [1].

Professionalism in Nursing Practice

Nursing professionalism is a multidimensional concept that includes attitudes, values, knowledge, and behaviors associated with ethical conduct and high-quality care. Core elements of professionalism include accountability, integrity, autonomy, and a commitment to lifelong learning and ongoing competence [2,3]. These qualities distinguish nursing as a profession and shape how nurses engage with patients, teams, and healthcare systems.

Professional identity begins to form during pre-licensure education and continues to develop throughout a nurse's career. Formal education introduces professional values, while clinical practice and socialization reinforce or challenge those values in real-world settings [4]. Individual motivation, mentorship, and workplace culture further influence how professionalism evolves over time [5].

Importantly, professionalism is closely tied to patient outcomes. Nurses who consistently demonstrate professional values are more likely to uphold ethical standards, advocate for patient safety, and incorporate evidence-based practice into care delivery [6]. For this reason, nursing education and professional development frameworks emphasize integrating professional values alongside clinical skills.

Because effective nursing practice requires both ethical judgment and technical expertise, nursing education and professional development frameworks emphasize integrating professional values such as compassion, integrity, and accountability along with clinical skills.

Awarding of Degrees and Credential Accuracy

Confusion often arises around the use of MS in Nursing versus MSN (Master of Science in Nursing), and the issue typically stems from how degrees are awarded by academic institutions.

An MSN indicates that the degree itself is specifically in Nursing. This is the formal title of the degree as it appears on the diploma and transcript. An MS in Nursing, however, usually reflects a broader Master of Science degree with a nursing focus or concentration. In this case, nursing describes the area of study rather than the degree title. While the difference may seem subtle, it matters for accuracy.

When listing credentials, the guiding principle is straightforward: use the degree that was awarded. Credentials should reflect the formal academic degree conferred by the institution, not what is most used within the profession or what may seem interchangeable.

For example, if a diploma states *Master of Science in Nursing*, using MSN is appropriate. If the degree awarded is an *MS in Nursing Leadership*, then MS is the correct credential, not MSN.

A correct example would be: Jim Smith, MS, BSN, RN

Credentialing Standards and Best Practices

Credentialing is a formal way of communicating a nurse's education, licensure, certification, and professional achievements. Proper credential use helps clarify preparation, role, and scope of practice for patients, colleagues, and healthcare organizations [1].

Both the American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN) and the American Nurses Association (ANA) recommend listing credentials in the following order:

1. Highest earned academic degree (e.g., MSN, DNP, BSN, PhD, EdD)
2. Licensure and state designation (e.g., RN, APRN)
3. National certifications (e.g., CCRN, CEN, FNP-BC)
4. Awards or honors (optional)

For bedside nurses, credential presentation should emphasize licensure and relevant clinical certifications, which clearly communicate scope of practice and clinical expertise to patients and colleagues.

For advanced practice, academic, or leadership roles, advanced degrees are listed first, followed by licensure and specialty certifications, reflecting scholarly preparation and professional role.

Use of "Dr." in Nursing Credentials

Nurses who hold doctoral degrees (PhD, DNP, or EdD) should avoid using the title "Dr." alongside the degree in a signature line. For example, writing *Dr. John Smith, PhD* is redundant and can create confusion for patients and colleagues. Best practice is to use either *John Smith, PhD* or *Dr. John Smith*, depending on the context, but not both [1,7].

Why Credential Accuracy Matters

Using credentials accurately supports accountability, role clarity, and professional credibility. It reinforces professional identity and aligns with ethical practice, competence, and lifelong learning—values central to nursing professionalism [2,4]. While research on professionalism in nursing is extensive, gaps remain in understanding how credential use influences patient perceptions, trust, and long-term professional behavior. Continued study in these areas can help strengthen professional standards and inform policy development [5].

Conclusion

Professionalism in nursing is shaped by education, ethics, accountability, and continuous professional growth. The thoughtful and accurate use of nursing credentials is one practical way professionalism is expressed. Distinguishing between bedside and academic credential presentation, accurately reflecting awarded degrees, and avoiding redundant use of "Dr." with terminal degrees all contribute to clarity, trust, and effective collaboration. In a profession grounded in integrity, even small details—like how credentials are listed—matter.

References

1. https://www.nursingworld.org/practice-policy/nursing-excellence/official-position-statements/id/determining-a-standard-order-of-credentials-for-the-professional-nurse
2. Azemian A, Mahmoudi H, Heidari M. Redefining the concept of professionalism in nursing: An integrative review. Frontiers of Nursing. 2021; 7: 12-23.
3. Martina Tomagova, Dominika Kohanova, Katarína Ziakova, Juraj Cap. Nurses' perception of professionalism in practice: A review of qualitative studies. Nurs Sci Q. 2023; 36: 387-398.
4. Huili Cao, Yejun Song, Yanming Wu, Yifei Du, Xingyue He. What is nursing professionalism? A concept analysis. BMC Nursing. 2023; 22: 34.

5. Xingyue He, Ya Mao, Huili Cao, Linbo Li, Yanming Wu, et al. Factors influencing the development of nursing professionalism: A qualitative study. BMC Nursing. 2024; 23: 283.
6. Jessica Zemlak, Tamar Rodney, Emma Mangano, Diana-Lyn Baptiste. Professionalism in pre-licensure nursing education: Core values, didactic coursework, and clinical training. J Clin Nurs. 2024; 62: 45-53.
7. https://www.aacnnursing.org/membership/nurse-credential-standard