

Accountability and Accessibility in Nursing: A Mini Literature Review

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ABSTRACT

Accountability and accessibility are essential principles that shape nursing practice and influence the quality and equity of patient care. Accountability refers to nurses' ethical, professional, and legal responsibility to provide safe, competent, and evidence-based care, while accessibility reflects patients' ability to obtain timely, equitable, and appropriate healthcare services. This mini literature review synthesizes peer-reviewed research published between 2020 and 2025 to examine the relationship between accountability and accessibility in nursing practice. Findings reveal a complex interplay between these concepts, particularly in settings characterized by high acuity, workforce shortages, and limited resources, where nurses must balance professional standards with systemic barriers to care. Understanding how these principles intersect is essential for improving patient outcomes, strengthening professional integrity, and informing healthcare leadership and policy initiatives.

KEYWORDS

Legal responsibility, Healthcare, Patient advocacy.

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Introduction

Nursing is a complex and dynamic profession grounded in responsibility, ethical practice, and patient-centered care. Nurses serve as the frontline providers of healthcare, advocating for patients, ensuring safety, and delivering evidence-based interventions across diverse clinical settings. Two fundamental concepts: accountability and accessibility play central roles in determining both the quality and equity of care. Accountability refers to a nurse's professional, ethical, and legal responsibility to provide competent, safe, and evidence-based care. It encompasses adherence to ethical principles, clinical standards, and organizational policies, and requires nurses to take ownership of their actions and decisions. Accessibility, on the other hand, reflects patients' ability to obtain timely, equitable, and appropriate healthcare services. It is influenced not only by

nurse behavior and competencies but also by systemic factors such as staffing, resources, healthcare policies, and social determinants of health.

The relationship between accountability and accessibility is complex. While accountability emphasizes professional responsibility and adherence to standards, accessibility focuses on removing barriers and ensuring equitable care delivery. In practice, nurses often face challenges in balancing these principles, particularly in high-acuity, resource-limited, or underserved settings. Understanding the interplay between accountability and accessibility is essential for improving patient outcomes, fostering professional integrity, and guiding healthcare policy. This literature review synthesizes recent research, 2020-2025, on accountability and accessibility in

nursing, explores their interaction, and highlights the role of nurse leaders and nurse educators in promoting both principles.

Problem Statement

Nurses are expected to provide safe, ethical, and evidence-based care while remaining fully accountable for their clinical decisions. At the same time, they often work in healthcare environments where patients face significant barriers to accessing timely and equitable care. Staffing shortages, limited resources, policy constraints, and social determinants of health can make it difficult for nurses to meet professional standards while also ensuring that care is accessible to all patients. This creates a real and ongoing challenge in everyday nursing practice, particularly in high-acuity and underserved settings. Although accountability and accessibility are both widely recognized as essential to quality nursing care, they are often discussed separately in the literature. Less attention has been given to how nurses experience the tension between these two principles and how leaders and educators can better support them in balancing both. Understanding this gap is important for improving patient outcomes, supporting nurses in their roles, and guiding nursing leadership, education, and healthcare policy.

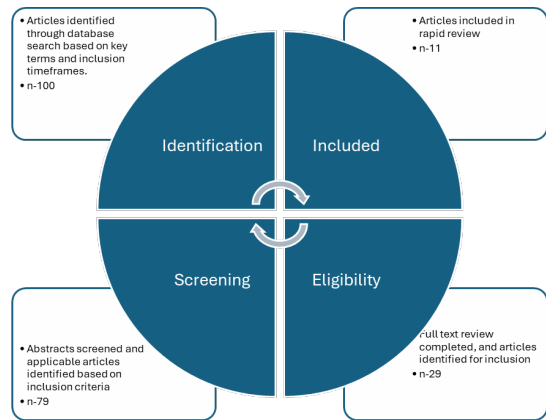


Literature Review

A comprehensive literature search was conducted using PubMed, Google Scholar, CINAHL, and EBSCO, along with a manual review of reference lists from relevant studies. Search terms included “nursing”, “accountability”, and “accessibility”. Articles published between 2021 and 2026 were considered for inclusion. The review was limited to peer-reviewed, English-language, full-text nursing journals, with a focus on North American publications. Applying a five-year publication window ensured that the literature reviewed reflected current evidence-based practice and contemporary challenges in nursing.

Accountability

Accountability is a cornerstone of professional nursing, encompassing legal, ethical, and professional responsibilities. It ensures that nurses provide care that meets established standards, protects patient safety, and maintains public trust. According to



Suliman et al. [1], accountability frameworks in clinical settings reduce instances of missed care by providing clear guidance on responsibilities and fostering a culture of responsibility among staff. Structured accountability interventions, such as defined workflows, performance evaluations, and checklists, have been shown to enhance adherence to clinical protocols and improve patient outcomes. Brooks Carthon et al. [2] further emphasized that accountability is not solely a personal attribute but also influenced by organizational culture. Nurses who perceive strong institutional support for accountability through governance structures, policies, and leadership engagement demonstrate higher adherence to ethical and professional standards. For example, in hospital settings serving socially disadvantaged populations, nurses with high accountability are more likely to advocate for equitable care, even in challenging conditions such as limited staffing or high patient volumes. Professional governance models support accountability by clarifying responsibilities and enabling autonomous decision-making within ethical and legal boundaries. Porter-O’Grady [3] highlighted that nursing professional governance frameworks empower nurses to make independent, evidence-based decisions while remaining accountable to both patients and institutions. Such structures create transparency, standardize expectations, and reduce variability in practice, ultimately enhancing patient safety. Similarly, Sadeghi [4] found that a strong patient safety culture reinforces nurses’ sense of accountability, as staff are more likely to follow protocols and report errors when they perceive organizational support for ethical and professional behavior. Accountability also extends to ongoing professional development. Nurses are expected to maintain clinical competence, update their knowledge, and adhere to evolving practice standards. Suliman et al. [1] demonstrated that nurses who engage in reflective practice and continuous education are better able to anticipate patient needs, apply evidence-based interventions, and take responsibility for care outcomes. These findings collectively suggest that accountability is multifaceted, encompassing individual competence, ethical responsibility, organizational support, and adherence to evidence-based practice.

Accessibility in Nursing

Accessibility refers to the degree to which patients can obtain

necessary healthcare services without undue delay or barriers. It is influenced by systemic factors, nursing practices, and social determinants of health. Nesengani et al. [5] conducted a systematic review examining barriers to effective nursing care in primary healthcare clinics in African countries. The study highlighted that limited staffing, resource constraints, high workloads, and infrastructural deficiencies significantly hinder nurses' ability to provide accessible care. These findings underscore that accessibility is closely tied to systemic support and resource allocation.

Brooks Carthon et al. [2] emphasized that socially disadvantaged patients often experience barriers to healthcare, even when nurses demonstrate high accountability. Structural inequalities, including socioeconomic status, geographic location, and healthcare policy limitations, can prevent patients from receiving timely care. This highlights the critical need for nurses to not only fulfill professional responsibilities but also to advocate for systemic solutions that improve access. Innovative care models have emerged as solutions to accessibility challenges. Sitthimongkol et al. [6] conducted an integrative review of nurse-led clinics in primary care, demonstrating that these models increase access for underserved populations by providing community-based, patient-centered care. Lake et al. [7] proposed a conceptual framework linking nursing system factors, including staffing ratios, workload management, and care coordination, to improved access and reduced health disparities. Cotts et al. [8] also highlighted the importance of accessibility in nursing education, showing that disability-inclusive accommodations and flexible learning modalities prepare future nurses to deliver care equitably. Accessibility is therefore multidimensional, encompassing patient-level, organization-level, and systemic-level factors. Nurses' ability to provide accessible care depends not only on professional competence and accountability but also on policies, resources, and leadership support that enable timely and equitable service delivery.

Accountability vs. Accessibility

Although accountability and accessibility are both essential, they can create tension in clinical practice. Nurses are accountable for delivering safe, competent, and ethical care, yet systemic barriers, high patient acuity, and resource constraints can limit accessibility. Suliman et al. [1] highlighted that when nurses face excessive workloads or insufficient staffing, the pressure to meet care standards can conflict with the ability to provide timely access to all patients. Muoio [9] also reported that nurses frequently face ethical dilemmas when prioritizing care due to limited resources, balancing the need to maintain accountability with the demand for accessibility. Research indicates that accountability and accessibility are interdependent rather than mutually exclusive. Brooks Carthon et al. [2] found that highly accountable nurses often advocate for patient access, demonstrating that professional responsibility can enhance accessibility. Conversely, accessibility challenges can compromise accountability by forcing nurses to make difficult decisions about prioritizing care. Zalon [10] emphasized that nurse leaders play a critical role in reconciling this tension by advocating for policies, redesigning workflows,

and supporting staffing strategies that allow nurses to uphold both principles simultaneously. In practice, maintaining the balance between accountability and accessibility requires system-level solutions, including governance structures, resource allocation, staff support, and interprofessional collaboration. Recognizing the tension and interplay between these concepts helps nurses, leaders, and policymakers design strategies that promote both ethical practice and equitable care.

Nurse Leaders' Role in Accountability and Accessibility

Nurse leaders, nurse educators, directors, and advanced practice nurses in leadership roles, play an essential role in shaping how accountability and accessibility are carried out in everyday practice. As advocates, mentors, and policy leaders, they enable nurses to deliver safe, ethical, and equitable care.

Supporting Accountability

Nurse leaders promote accountability by establishing clear expectations through policies, protocols, and shared governance structures [3]. They support adherence to professional standards, ethical guidelines, and patient safety priorities while using performance evaluations as opportunities for feedback, growth, and professional development [4]. By fostering a supportive and structured practice environment, leaders allow nurses to work autonomously while remaining accountable for patient outcomes.

Advancing Accessibility

Leaders also influence accessibility by advocating for adequate staffing, appropriate resource allocation, and the use of supportive technologies that enhance care delivery [7]. Many leaders champion innovative care models such as nurse-led clinics, telehealth services, and community-based programs, which help improve access for underserved populations [6]. Collaboration with policymakers and interdisciplinary teams further enables nurse leaders to address systemic barriers that limit equitable access to care [10].

Mentorship and Professional Growth

Through mentorship and ongoing professional development, nurse leaders serve as role models who reinforce the importance of ethical practice, reflective thinking, and evidence-based decision-making [1]. By supporting nurses in navigating complex clinical and organizational challenges, leaders help cultivate a culture in which accountability and accessibility are viewed as shared responsibilities.

Balancing Accountability and Accessibility

Nurse leaders are often tasked with managing the tension between maintaining professional standards and responding to access-related constraints. By identifying system-level barriers, improving workflows, and advocating for needed resources, they support nurses in delivering safe, high-quality, and equitable care, even in challenging practice environments [9].

Nurse Educators' Role in Accountability and Accessibility

Nurse educators play a critical role in preparing nurses to meet

the ethical and practical demands of modern healthcare. Through teaching, mentorship, and curriculum design, educators help ensure that accountability and accessibility are foundational to both nursing education and clinical practice.

Fostering Accountability

Accountability is reinforced in nursing education through an emphasis on professional ethics, evidence-based practice, and standards of care. Nurse educators' model ethical decision-making, sound clinical judgment, and reflective practice, helping students understand their responsibility for patient outcomes. Learning strategies such as simulation, clinical evaluation, and guided reflection support the development of critical thinking and self-awareness, which are essential components of accountable practice. Beyond initial education, nurse educators continue to reinforce accountability through mentorship and lifelong learning. By supporting credentialing, continuing education, and competency development, educators promote a culture in which accountability is expected and supported throughout a nurse's career.

Strengthening Accessibility

Nurse educators prepare nurses to address barriers to care by teaching cultural competence, patient advocacy, and health equity principles [11]. Community-based learning, telehealth training, and exposure to underserved populations help students understand how accessibility challenges affect patient outcomes. Educators further influence system level change by preparing nurses to advocate for policy reform, participate in innovative care models, and support initiatives aimed at reducing healthcare disparities [6].

Inclusive curriculum design also plays a role in promoting accessibility. By accommodating diverse learning needs and perspectives, nurse educators help develop a workforce capable of

meeting the needs of diverse patient populations [8].

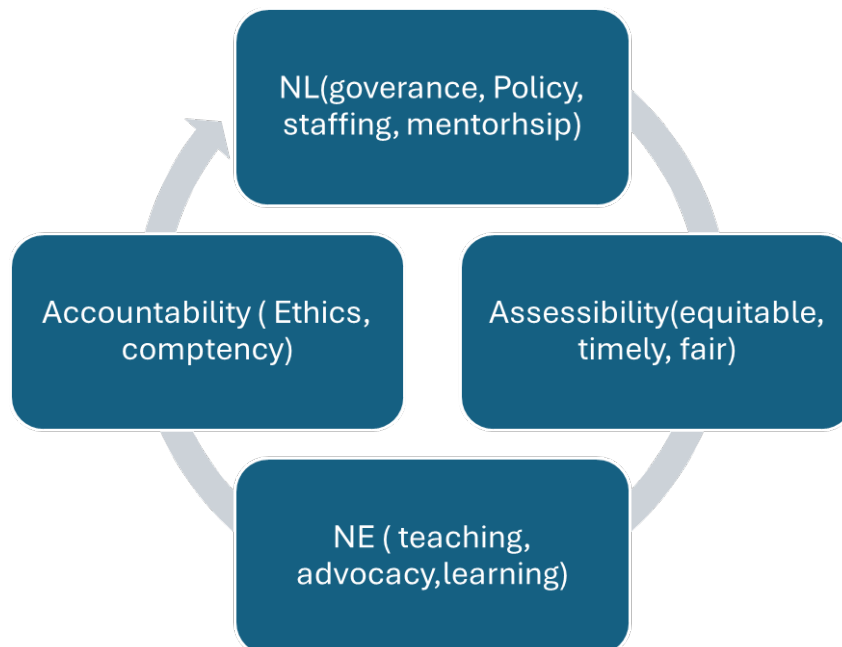
Integrating Accountability and Accessibility

Nurse educators are uniquely positioned to illustrate how accountability and accessibility intersect in real-world practice. Through case studies, discussion, and reflective learning, they help nurses recognize situations in which professional responsibilities and access limitations may conflict. By encouraging ethical reasoning and patient-centered decision-making, educators prepare nurses to navigate these challenges with integrity and compassion.

Conclusion

Accountability and accessibility are closely connected and essential to professional nursing practice. Accountability supports ethical practice, clinical competence, and responsibility for patient outcomes, while accessibility ensures that patients can receive timely, equitable, and appropriate care. Recent research highlights how deeply intertwined these principles are in practice. Nurses who demonstrate strong accountability often become advocates for improved access to care, yet ongoing systemic barriers such as limited resources, staffing challenges, and policy constraints can make it difficult to consistently uphold professional standards.

Nurse leaders play a vital role in strengthening both accountability and accessibility by creating supportive practice environments, promoting ethical standards, and advocating for resources and innovative care models. Likewise, nurse educators prepare future nurses by emphasizing professional responsibility, ethical decision-making, and advocacy, while helping learners understand and address barriers to equitable care. Together, leaders and educators support nurses in navigating the complexities of modern healthcare.



Advancing accountability and accessibility is essential to improving patient outcomes, maintaining public trust, and addressing healthcare inequities. Integrating these principles across nursing practice, leadership, and education allows the profession to respond effectively to the evolving needs of patients and communities while upholding the highest standards of care.

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