



## Training of nurses and midwives in Poland and the system of accreditation

Kształcenie pielęgniarek i położnych w Polsce a system akredytacji

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### SUMMARY

In Poland professions of nurse and midwife are regulated medical jobs. A condition for practising these jobs is holding the evidence of formal qualifications which enables to provide these services. The qualifications are specified in Polish provisions of law, mainly in the Act on the Profession of Nurse and Midwife. In Poland function legal solutions which are to ensure high quality education concerning the professions in question. These regulations also allow to gain comparability of professional qualifications and recognition of those in the EU Member States. The Law on Higher Education enacts Polish Accreditation Committee which operates alongside the minister relevant for higher education. Provisions of law related to Polish Accreditation Committee arising from the Law on Higher Education are general regulations concerning all universities. On the other hand, the Act on the Profession of Nurse and Midwife obligates the schools which provide education for future nurses and midwives to obtain additional accreditation. Failing to gain the accreditation results in the school graduate not obtaining the right to exercise the profession. The accreditation is granted by The National Council for Accreditation of Nursing and Midwifery Schools which operates at the minister relevant for healthcare. The adopted legal solutions not only take into account the evaluation of curricula and education conditions but also effects of education. Thus Polish system of accreditation guarantees quality of professional training of nurses and midwives.

*Key words:* accreditation, graduate nursing education, graduate medical education

### STRESZCZENIE

W Polsce zawody pielęgniarstwa i położnictwa są uregulowanymi prawnie zawodami medycznymi. Warunkiem uprawiania tych zawodów jest w posiadanie dokumentów potwierdzających kwalifikacje do ich wykonywania. Kwalifikacje są określone w polskich przepisach prawa, głównie w Ustawie o Zawodzie Pielęgniarki i Położnej. W Polsce funkcjonują rozwiązania prawne, które mają zapewnić wysoką jakość edukacji dotyczącej zawodów o których mowa. Przepisy te umożliwiają również uzyskanie porównywalności kwalifikacji zawodowych i uznawanie ich w państwach członkowskich UE. Prawo o Szkolnictwie Wyższym uchwała Polską Komisję Akredytacyjną, która działa razem z ministrem właściwym do spraw szkolnictwa wyższego. Przepisy prawa związanego z Komisją Akredytacyjną wynikające z ustawy o Szkolnictwie Wyższym, są ogólnymi przepisami dotyczącymi wszystkich uczelni. Z drugiej strony, Ustawa o Zawodzie Pielęgniarki i Położnej zobowiązuje szkoły, które prowadzą edukację przyszłych pielęgniarek i położnych do uzyskania dodatkowej akredytacji. Brak akredytacji uniemożliwia szkole nadawanie prawa wykonywania zawodu swoim absolwentom. Akredytacja jest przyznawana przez Narodową Radę Akredytacji Pielęgniarstwa i Położnictwa Szkoły, która działa przy Ministerstwie Zdrowia. Przyjęte rozwiązania prawne biorą pod uwagę nie tylko ocenę programów i warunków edukacji, ale także ocenę efektów kształcenia. Tym samym polski system akredytacji gwarantuje jakość kształcenia zawodowego pielęgniarek i położnych.

## INTRODUCTION

In 2001 legal solutions were implemented in Poland aiming at providing quality education for nurses and midwives. These modifications, introduced through The Act on the Profession of Nurse and Midwife, were to adapt the system of training nurses and midwives in Poland so as it matched the level of the one in the EU. The modifications allowed to gain comparability of professional qualifications and recognition of those in the Member States. This in turn enabled the execution of freedom of movement for persons, services and practising the jobs of nurse and midwife. The modifications were also supposed to prepare students for challenges of the modern world and volatile needs of market economy [1]. One of the objectives of the implemented regulations was to increase the level of education through verification of quality of education by an independent team. In order to achieve it, The National Council for Accreditation of Medical Training was created, later replaced by The National Council for Accreditation of Nursing and Midwifery Schools [2]. The Council is responsible for granting accreditation or formal confirmation that the given institution is competent in performing specified tasks [3].

### Legal regulations in Poland

The supreme legal act is the Constitution of the Republic of Poland of April 2nd 1997. The act (in clause 65, section 1) indicates that everyone is entitled to freedom of choice of profession and practising it and freedom of choice of workplace. The subject scope of this law is related to both Polish nationals as well as foreign nationals residing in the territory of Poland. The law stipulates that the legislator may introduce restrictions on accessibility of exercising certain professions. This is undoubtedly true for trades of nurse and midwife. Only holders of certificates or diplomas which confirm acquiring the right formal qualifications are permitted to practise these jobs [4].

Professions of nurse and midwife are in Poland medical occupations, which is enacted in the 15th April 2011 act on health care activity. According to the act, a person authorised on the grounds of separate regulations to provide health services as well as a person who holds a certificate of professional qualifications within a specified scope or a defined field of medicine, is a medical professional [5]. Moreover, professions of nurse and midwife are regulated by the 18th March 2008 law on the principles of recognition of professional qualifications obtained in EU Member States. A regulated profession is a set of professional activities whose performing is dependent on meeting eligibility requirements and conditions determined in Polish provisions of law [6].

Two main acts which involve practising as a nurse and midwife in Poland are The Act on the Profession of Nurse and Midwife and The Act on Self-government of Nurses and Midwives [7, 8, 9]. The 1st July 2011 Act on Self-

government of Nurses and Midwives regulates functioning of the self-government of nurses and midwives. Pursuant to its resolutions, members of the self-government are those nurses and midwives, who have confirmed or granted right to exercise the job and are registered in the relevant regional council of nurses and midwives according to their workplace. Nurses and midwives bear the responsibility for being members of self-government, whose objective is to represent them. Self-governments also see to satisfactory job performance, bearing in mind both public interest and job protection. Other objectives of self-government include, e.g. determining and popularizing the rules of professional ethics as well as their supervision or setting professional standards and standards of professional qualification binded with particular posts [8].

Key issues connected with performing the professions of nurse and midwife are regulated by the 15th July 2011 act on the professions of nurse and midwife. Its subject scope includes practising as a nurse, obtaining the right to provide nursing services, vocational and postgraduate education [7].

The act indicates that the jobs of nurse and midwife are independent medical professions. The right to perform these jobs may be granted to a person:

- who holds a certificate or diploma of completion of any Polish nursing school (or a foreign one, pursuant to separate provisions),
- who has an unlimited legal capacity,
- whose health condition allows to perform as a nurse,
- who displays an impeccable ethical conduct.

Also the UE citizens and foreign nationals who fulfilled the conditions specified in the act are entitled to the right to exercise the said profession.

Among reasons for expiration of the right to exercise the profession the act lists: expiring of the date for which the right was granted, death, loss of unlimited legal capacity, waiving the right to perform the job, losing the right to perform the job on the grounds of decree absolute by the nurses and midwives tribunal or a verdict of prohibition from exercising the profession adjudicated by the court, loss of citizenship, and in relation to foreign nationals – loss of the UE Member State citizenship or revocation of residence permit or revocation of the status of long-term EC resident [7].

Another chapter of the act involves vocational and postgraduate education. A student undergoes theoretical and clinical training. In the process of theoretical training he or she acquires professional knowledge, experience and skills necessary for planning, organizing and providing medical care as well as assessing related actions. During clinical training, however, he or she learns how to provide comprehensive health care as a team member, in direct contact with both healthy and diseased persons. This training is conducted at

institutions providing health care services [7].

### **Tertiary education for nurses and midwives**

The current model of educating nurses and midwives in Poland postulates training these jobs at universities as well as higher schools of vocational education. The system comprises educating at the first and second cycle of study. In Poland the first university studies at licencjat level (undergraduate, or first-cycle studies) were launched in 1999, whereas in 2014 a total number of schools of higher education training in the professions of nurse and midwife reached 73. They were 15 universities and 58 higher schools of vocational education. Bridging undergraduate studies are offered by 66 schools. A candidate for the first-cycle studies has to hold a Certificate of Matriculation and must be of good health.

A cycle of education at the undergraduate studies takes at least 3 years and covers at least 4600 hours of professional training, of which clinical training accounts for at least 1/2 and theoretical training for at least 1/3 of the entire training duration. A graduate obtains a professional title of licencjat of nursing or licencjat of midwifery (equivalent of BA). The first-cycle studies in the fields of nursing and midwifery must be conducted on full-time basis. Only in an exceptional case may they last shorter than 3 years. It relates to the so called bridging undergraduate studies. These are offered to nurses and midwives who completed a nursing or midwifery secondary school and who hold a certificate of secondary education (the 14th June 2012 regulation of the Minister of Health on specified conditions of running studies for nurses and midwives who hold a Certificate of Matriculation and are medical secondary school graduates or completed either a post-secondary or a post-matriculation nursing school). Having completed the first-cycle studies, a nurse or midwife may continue with the second-cycle studies. These are no shorter than 4 semesters. The second-cycle studies cover no less than 1300 hours, including theoretical and practical training. The graduate receives a professional title of magister (equivalent of MA) of Nursing or Midwifery [10].

### **The assessment of quality of education in the fields of Nursing and Midwifery in Poland**

#### *Polish Accreditation Committee*

Pursuant to clause 70 of the Constitution, schools of higher education are guaranteed autonomy, nevertheless, its principles are determined in the law. In Poland the fundamental legal regulation on schools of higher education is the 27th July 2005 Law on Higher Education. The law enacts Polish Accreditation Committee which operates alongside the Minister for Higher Education [11]. The Committee is an independent institution whose aim is to improve the quality of education, which is executed through a cyclical

assessment of quality of education at each field of study in Poland [3]. The Committee makes a twofold evaluation: a curricular and an institutional one. The curricular evaluation involves the effects of education, fulfilling the conditions of conducting the studies, the functioning of effects of learning. On the other hand, the institutional evaluation focuses on the functioning of the basic organizational unit of the university [12]. The Committee presents to the minister relevant for higher education the following: opinions on creating a school of higher education or granting it or its basic organizational unit a license to conduct studies in a defined field, level and profile of education; results of the curricular and institutional evaluation; opinions on reinstatement of the suspended license to conduct studies in a defined field, level and profile of education; opinions on creating by a foreign university a higher education institution or its branch [11].

Regulations related to Polish Accreditation Committee arising from the Law on Higher Education are of general nature, concerning all schools of higher education. On the other hand, the Act on the Profession of Nurse and Midwife obligates the schools which provide education for nurses and midwives to obtain additional accreditation [2].

#### *The National Council for Accreditation of Nursing and Midwifery Schools*

In Poland the process of education accreditation concerning the professions of nurse and midwife started in 2002. The process involves the assessment of education in the said fields. The Act on the Profession of Nurse and Midwife calls the National Council for Accreditation of Nursing and Midwifery Schools. The Council operates at the minister relevant for healthcare. The Minister of Health supervises medical universities [13]. Pursuant to the 29th November 2012 regulation by the Minister of Health on the National Council for Accreditation of Nursing and Midwifery Schools, the National Council comprises 12 members, appointed and discharged by the minister relevant for healthcare. Half of its candidates are proposed by the nursing and midwifery schools, and another half by the self-government of nurses and midwives, and by professional associations and organisations of nurses and midwives. The members vote among them for a chairperson. The term of office of the National Council lasts 4 years [14].

The National Council works through sessions. They are presided by the chairperson of the National Council or another person authorised by him. Moreover, the sessions are attended by a representative of the minister relevant for healthcare and one of the minister relevant for higher education, but only as advisors. The sessions are called at least once a month by the chairperson of the Council. A session may also be called by three members of the Council following the application in which a subject of the session is indicated [14].

The objective of the National Council for Accreditation is the evaluation of education in the fields of nursing and midwifery. The objective is implemented through performing the tasks determined by the act on the profession of nurse and midwife. The Council assesses whether a higher education institution applying for the accreditation of nursing or midwifery studies fulfils the appropriate educational standards. Furthermore, the Council assesses on an ongoing basis the fulfilment of educational standards by particular nursing and midwifery schools. This task is executed e.g. through school inspections and educational result analyses. During inspections the Council examines the course of and conditions for implementing the teaching process. During the accreditation procedure the following are evaluated: implementation methods of the training programme and detailed period of student education; teaching tools, including clinical training tools, as well as the internal educational quality assessment system. These conditions are assessed on the basis of specific criteria adopted by the National Council according to applicable standards. If all the educational standards are fulfilled, the Council applies for granting the accreditation to the minister relevant for healthcare. If the said requirements are not met – the Council applies for withdrawal of the accreditation [14].

Schools which commence nursing or midwifery education must meet the appropriate educational standards in order to be granted the accreditation for a period of 3 years. Institutions which train nurses and midwives and apply for accreditation renewal may be granted one for a period not exceeding 3 years, as long as they fulfil the right conditions. Schools subject to assessment include institutions which:

- commence education at the first-cycle studies,
- provide education at the first-cycle studies and are willing to extend the accreditation,
- teach at the first-cycle studies nurses and midwives who hold a diploma or certificate of a nurse or midwife,
- educate at the second-cycle studies [14].

The National Council for Accreditation is responsible for developing accreditation strategy and procedure. Currently the procedure consists of the following stages:

1. A school offers education in the nursing and midwifery professions.
2. The school submits an appropriate application to the National Council for Accreditation.
3. The National Council for Accreditation considers the application.
4. The assessment is conducted by the National Council for Accreditation.
5. A post-inspection protocol is drawn up.
6. The National Council for Accreditation applies to the Minister of Health for granting the accreditation.

7. The Minister of Health issues a certificate of accreditation [14].

Schools providing education in the fields of nursing and midwifery are obligated to obtain accreditation from the Minister of Health regardless of the Minister for Science and Higher Education granting them permission to educate in the said fields. If the schools do not hold the Minister of Health's accreditation, their graduates will not be entitled to practise the profession. The accreditation procedure is initiated through the school's application. Separate applications should be submitted for the field of nursing and for the field of midwifery. The Minister of Health's regulation determines in detail what should be included in the application [15]. It should provide e. g. specific information about the school, its infrastructure (including teaching tools), the number of students, the number of school employees, including the number of academic teachers and their scientific achievements, as well as information related to the teaching process for the fields of nursing and midwifery (e. g. the plan of the studies and the curriculum, student enrolment system, educational process organisation, including professional training and a method of its documenting, evaluation methods of educational result, assessment methods of school's functioning). The application for accreditation needs to be submitted in duplicate (one copy in an electronic form) to the Ministry of Health. The school applying for accreditation for the first time submits the application no later than three months before the enrolment commences. The school applying for accreditation renewal submits the application no later than three months before the expiry date of the previously granted accreditation. The application is recognised at the first session of the National Council for Accreditation after it has been received. The National Council may demand completion of the application, setting a completion deadline and scope. Should the completion deadline be missed, the application will not be considered [15, 16].

The next stage of the procedure is assessment carried out by the National Council for Accreditation. It is conducted by academic teachers of nursing and midwifery, with the reservation that it may not be carried out by employees of the given school. During the supervision, the institution is obligated to disclose all documents and provide relevant explanations. The inspection may not exceed three days. Then a post-inspection protocol is drawn up by the National Council for Accreditation. The protocol takes into account all the information concerning the inspection practices. Also, it contains post-inspection recommendations, stating the specific implementation date. The protocol is presented during a session of the National Council for Accreditation and then sent to the school so that

it may refer to the post-inspection recommendations [14].

In the next stage, the National Council for Accreditation applies to the Minister of Health for granting or refusal to grant accreditation. The National Council for Accreditation adopts a resolution in an open vote, giving a positive or negative opinion. Resolutions of the National Council for Accreditation are adopted in an open vote by simple majority of votes with at least half of the total number of members present. Should the number of votes be equal, the chairperson of the National Council has a deciding vote. The resolution on granting the accreditation is then handed over to the Minister of Health.

The accreditation for nursing and midwifery studies is conditioned on ensuring:

- implementation of the training programme;
- teaching staff;
- teaching tools, including clinical training tools;
- the internal educational quality assessment system [17].

The accreditation granted is confirmed by a certificate issued by the Minister of Health. The accreditation is granted for a period of 3 to 5 years. It is through the administrative decision made by the Minister of Health that the accreditation is granted, denied or withdrawn. Denial or withdrawal of the accreditation shall result in suspending the enrolment process until the accreditation renewal [14,17].

## CONCLUSION

In Poland, educational quality assessment in the fields of nursing and midwifery is conducted by two independent bodies – Polish Accreditation Committee and the National Council for Accreditation of Nursing and Midwifery Schools. The adopted solutions take into account not only the assessment of curriculum and training conditions, but also the effects of education as they are education standards, or elements which condition achieving the expected teaching effect, that undergo evaluation. In Polish related literature accreditation is described as a guaranty of quality education in professional training for nurses and midwives [1]. This opinion is also expressed in the international literature. The importance of a type of accreditation system was stressed by the International Council of Nurses, which stated that it determines the quality of professional training [2].

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