Transforming the Practical Nursing Program by Adapting to the Disrupted Healthcare Era: Digital Readiness Career Pathways and Respectful Team Culture

การปฏิรูปหลักสูตรผู้ช่วยพยาบาลเพื่อรับมือยุคแห่งการพลิกโฉมการดูแลสุขภาพ: ความพร้อมด้านดิจิทัล เส้นทางความก้าวหน้าในอาชีพ และวัฒนธรรมทีมที่เคารพซึ่งกันและกัน

Mullika Singnoi[1*], Parichad Apidechakul[2], Phongthara Vichitvejpaisal[3]

[1]School of Nurse Assistant, Department of Nursing Siriraj Hospital,
Faculty of Medicine Siriraj Hospital, Mahidol University, Bangkok 10700

[2]Siriraj Health science Education Excellence Center, Faculty of Medicine Siriraj Hospital,
Mahidol University, Bangkok 10700

[3]Department of Anesthesiology, Faculty of Medicine Siriraj Hospital, Mahidol University, Bangkok 10700

มัลลิกา สิงห์น้อย[1*], ปาริชาต อภิเดชากุล[2], พงศ์ธารา วิจิตเวชไพศาล[3]

[1]โรงเรียนผู้ช่วยพยาบาล ฝ่ายการพยาบาล โรงพยาบาลศิริราช คณะแพทยศาสตร์ศิริราชพยาบาล
มหาวิทยาลัยมหิดล กรุงเทพมหานคร 10700

[2]ศูนย์ความเป็นเลิศทางการศึกษาวิทยาศาสตร์สุขภาพ คณะแพทยศาสตร์ศิริราชพยาบาล
มหาวิทยาลัยมหิดล กรุงเทพมหานคร 10700

[3]ภาควิชาวิสัญญีวิทยา คณะแพทยศาสตร์ศิริราชพยาบาล มหาวิทยาลัยมหิดล กรุงเทพมหานคร 10700

*Corresponding authors, e-mail: Mullika.sin@mahidol.ac.th

Abstract

The Practical Nursing Program plays a crucial role in the healthcare system by providing essential support to nurses and other medical professionals as well as producing a workforce to Thailand's public health service facilities. However, it is presently challenged by a high turnover rate. The healthcare field continues to face disruptions, including technological advancements, shifting patient care needs, and workforce shortages. Therefore, it is increasingly vital to reassess and adapt the Practical Nursing Program to remain effective in order to prepare practical nurses for the evolving demands of healthcare. Therefore, this article proposes three key reform guidelines: (1) integrating digital technology into training, (2) creating clear professional career pathways, and (3) promoting a respectful organizational culture to retain personnel and enhance long-term patient care quality.

The first key area for transformation involves incorporating digital tools and technologies into training, ensuring that practical nurses are equipped with the skills needed to navigate new healthcare systems, such as electronic health records and telemedicine platforms. Additionally, adapting the curriculum to focus on patient-centered care, communication skills, and cultural competency will help practical nurses provide more personalized and effective care. Second

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important consideration is improving career pathways for practical nurses. By offering opportunities for career progression and professional development, the program can retain skilled workers and help to decrease turnover rates. Lastly, it is recommended to promote a respectful organizational culture by encouraging interdisciplinary collaboration to strengthen professional relationship.

In conclusion, these above-stated three guidelines will help prepare practical nurses to cope with the disruptive change of the healthcare field. This reform, which focuses on incorporating digital skills, professional growth, and respectful organizational culture will serve as an important foundation for strengthening the country's healthcare system in the future.

Keywords: Career progression, Digital training, Healthcare disruption, Practical Nursing Program, Workforce development

บทคัดย่อ

หลักสูตรผู้ช่วยพยาบาลมีบทบาทที่สำคัญในระบบบริการสุขภาพ เพื่อช่วยสนับสนุนพยาบาลและบุคลากรทางการแพทย์เป็นหลัก ทั้งยังเป็นกลไกสำคัญในการผลิตกำลังคนให้กับสถานบริการสาธารณสุขของประเทศไทย อย่างไรก็ตาม ในปัจจุบันวิชาชีพนี้กำลังเผชิญกับความท้าทายจากอัตราการลาออกที่สูงอย่างต่อเนื่อง เนื่องจากวงการสุขภาพกำลังเผชิญกับการเปลี่ยนแปลงอย่างรวดเร็ว ทั้งในด้านความก้าวหน้าทางเทคโนโลยี ความต้องการการดูแลผู้ป่วยที่เปลี่ยนไป และการขาดแคลนกำลังคน ดังนั้นการทบทวนและปรับปรุงหลักสูตรผู้ช่วยพยาบาลจึงมีความสำคัญอย่างยิ่ง เพื่อให้หลักสูตรยังคงมีประสิทธิภาพและสามารถเตรียมความพร้อมบุคลากรเพื่อรองรับความต้องการที่เปลี่ยนแปลงไปของระบบสุขภาพ บทความนี้จึงเสนอแนวทางการปฏิรูปหลักที่สำคัญ 3 ประการ ได้แก่: 1) การบูรณาการเทคโนโลยีดิจิทัลเข้ามาใช้ในหลักสูตร: เพื่อให้ผู้ช่วยพยาบาลมีทักษะที่จำเป็นในการใช้งานระบบการดูแลสุขภาพรูปแบบใหม่ เช่น เวชระเบียนอิเล็กทรอนิกส์และแพลตฟอร์มการแพทย์ทางไกล นอกจากนี้ การปรับหลักสูตรให้มุ่งเน้นการดูแลผู้ป่วยเป็นศูนย์กลาง (patient-centered care) ทักษะการสื่อสาร และความเข้าใจในวัฒนธรรม จะช่วยให้การดูแลผู้ป่วยเฉพาะบุคคลมีประสิทธิภาพยิ่งขึ้น 2) การสร้างเส้นทางความก้าวหน้าในอาชีพที่ชัดเจน: เพื่อดึงดูดและรักษาบุคลากรที่มีคุณภาพให้อยู่ในวิชาชีพในระยะยาว และ3)การส่งเสริมวัฒนธรรมองค์กรที่เคารพซึ่งกันและกัน: ด้วยการสนับสนุนให้เกิดการทำงานร่วมกันระหว่างสหสาขาวิชาชีพ เพื่อเสริมสร้างความสัมพันธ์ในทีมให้แข็งแกร่งยิ่งขึ้น แนวทางทั้งสามที่กล่าวมาข้างต้นจะช่วยเตรียมความพร้อมให้ผู้ช่วยพยาบาลสามารถรับมือกับการเปลี่ยนแปลงอย่างรวดเร็วของวงการดูแลสุขภาพ การปฏิรูปซึ่งมุ่งเน้นการบูรณาการทักษะด้านดิจิทัล การเติบโตทางวิชาชีพ และการสร้างวัฒนธรรมองค์กรที่เคารพซึ่งกันและกันนี้ จะเป็นรากฐานสำคัญในการเสริมสร้างความแข็งแกร่งให้กับระบบสุขภาพของประเทศในอนาคต

คำสำคัญ: ความก้าวหน้าในอาชีพ การฝึกอบรมดิจิทัล ความเปลี่ยนแปลงในระบบสุขภาพ หลักสูตรประกาศนียบัตรผู้ช่วยพยาบาล การพัฒนากำลังคนด้านสุขภาพ

Introduction

The Practical Nursing program serves as an essential pillar in healthcare, providing crucial support to nurses and physicians. Practical Nurse assists with patient care, ensuring smooth healthcare delivery in hospitals, long-term care facilities, and home healthcare settings. Their contributions allow registered nurses and doctors to focus on specialized tasks while maintaining efficient patient management. [1-3] However, due to the current shortage of nurse and practical nurse which are 1 nurse per 343 population and 1 practical nurse per 1,000 population, the plan has been developed to increase production of nurses and practical nurses. According to the Nursing Council's data from 2024, Thailand has 21,974 registered practical nurses. Of this total, 14,453 practical nurses (65.77%) are employed in public healthcare facilities, and 7,521 practical nurses (34.33%) work in the private facilities Moreover, since there are no specific international standards for practical nurses, we refer to the general ratio of healthcare personnel to the population (e.g. one nurse for every 270 people). [Thus, a ratio of fewer than 1 practical nurse per 1,000 people clearly indicates an insufficient shortage.] Even though the problem of practical nurse shortage is severe, the health facilities are encountering the high turnover rate of practical nurses. [4,5] This is because of limited career opportunities, low wages, work overload and inadequate professional recognition. Additionally, a lack of mutual respect among medical colleagues can contribute to workplace dissatisfaction, further exacerbating the challenges of retention. [6-8] Thus, this article is primarily focused on conducting a comprehensive review of relevant domestic and international literature. The aim is to analyze the underlying issues and synthesize policy and practical recommendations that are specifically tailored to the Thailand's healthcare system.

The Current State of the Practical Nursing Program

Program Structure: The Practical Nursing Program is structured as a one-year intensive training course aimed at equipping high school graduates with the foundational skills necessary to support patient care. Generally, the standard curriculum must have a study period of one year with a total of not less than 36 credits. The curriculum structure consists of the following:

1. General Education Courses: Not less than 6 credits.
2. Specific Courses: Not less than 28 credits. 2.1) Theoretical Courses: Not less than 18 credits. 2.2) Practical Courses: Not less than 10 credits.
3. Elective Courses: Not less than 2 credits.

For the theoretical section, a minimum of 15 hours of study per semester is equivalent to 1 credit. A minimum of 30 hours per semester in a situation is equivalent to 1 credit for practical

training and for the practical training on a patient ward, a minimum of 60 hours per semester is equivalent to 1 credit. The curriculum emphasizes on fundamental care skills under the supervision of a professional nurse. It typically includes both classroom-based instruction and hands-on clinical training. [9,10,11] Students learn essential skills such as assisting patients with daily activities, maintaining hygiene, monitoring vital signs, and supporting nurses and other healthcare professionals. With approximately 101 programs implemented nationwide, they can assure a steady supply of trained Practical Nurses to meet the healthcare demands of both urban and rural areas. [9] Despite the comprehensive curriculum, its short duration often limits the scope for in-depth skill development or specialization.

Contributions to Healthcare: Practical Nurses are a critical component of the healthcare system, particularly in long-term care facilities, hospitals, and home care settings.[1] They serve as the backbone of patient care by performing routine yet essential tasks, thereby alleviating the workload of nurses and allowing them to focus on more complex medical responsibilities. This support is crucial in maintaining efficient workflows, ensuring patient comfort, and delivering high-quality care. [2,10] Moreover, Practical Nurses often act as the primary point of contact for patients, fostering trust and providing emotional support, especially in settings where staffing shortages are common. Their contributions are indispensable to the overall functionality and sustainability of healthcare organizations. [11-13]

Challenges Identified: Despite their importance, the Practical Nurse profession faces several significant challenges that contribute to high turnover rates among graduates. One of the primary issues is the lack of clear career progression pathways. [8,14,15] Many Practical Nurses find themselves in stagnant roles with limited opportunities for advancement or specialization, leading to frustration and eventual resignation. [14-16] Additionally, the combination of insufficient compensation for workload and risk, and a lack of role recognition from interdisciplinary teams, directly affect to low morale and professional burnout. This dynamic is a critical factor driving staff turnover from the profession. These factors collectively discourage many graduates from pursuing long-term careers in the field, threatening the sustainability of the program and the healthcare system's ability to rely on this vital workforce. [8,10,11,16]

Challenges in the Context of a Disrupted Medical Field

1. Technology and Role Redesign

Technological Disruptions: The rise of automation and digital healthcare tools is transforming traditional roles within the health field. Technologies may replace some traditional roles. For instance, automated vital signs monitoring could lessen the need for practical nurses to

manually check vitals, while caregiving robots might take on duties such as helping with patient transfers or daily routines.[17] Tasks once performed manually, such as patient documentation, and basic caregiving functions, are increasingly being handled by advanced devices and software. [15] While these innovations improve efficiency and accuracy, they also reduce the reliance on human intervention for routine tasks. For Practical Nurses, this shift means their roles may become obsolete or require significant adaptation to new technologies. [16] Without proper training to integrate these tools into their skill set, many Practical Nurses may find themselves ill-equipped to meet the demands of a modern healthcare environment.

2. Career Ladders and Pay/Recognition

Workforce Dynamics: The healthcare workforce is undergoing rapid changes, with an increasing emphasis on highly specialized roles. As a result, support roles like Practical Nurses are often undervalued and overlooked despite their critical contributions. [3,14] This undervaluation manifests in lower wages, limited recognition, and fewer opportunities for professional development compared to other healthcare positions. [18] The absence of a formal credit transfer pathway from the Practical Nursing certificate program to the Bachelor of Nursing Science degree means that individuals seeking professional advancement must restart their education from the beginning. [19,20] The perception of being at the bottom of the healthcare hierarchy contributes to low morale and high turnover rates, further destabilizing the profession. Additionally, the growing demand for multi-skilled healthcare workers creates pressure for Practical Nurses to acquire new competencies without corresponding support or incentives. [19,20]

Systemic Barriers: Structural issues within the healthcare system exacerbate the challenges faced by Practical Nurses. [8] There is a notable absence of policies or programs aimed at providing clear pathways for career advancement. Most of healthcare facilities lack of a formal career ladder for practical nurses, with no clear path for specialization or promotion to supervisory positions. [7,8,21] Unlike other healthcare professions that offer certifications, degrees, or specializations, the Practical Nurse role remains a static position with minimal opportunities for career advancement. This lack of progression discourages long-term commitment and reduces the attractiveness of the profession for potential candidates. [14,22] Furthermore, limited advocacy for improved working conditions and recognition within healthcare institutions leaves Practical Nurses vulnerable to burnout and job dissatisfaction, perpetuating a cycle of attrition. [23]

3. Respectful Team Culture

Workplace Culture and Professional Recognition: A significant challenge in the disrupted medical field is workplace culture—particularly the lack of mutual respect among medical

colleagues.[8,24] Practical Nurses frequently experience exclusion from medical discussions, dismissive attitudes from higher-ranking staff, and an overall lack of acknowledgment for their contributions. This negatively impacts morale and job satisfaction, leading to early exits from the profession.[25]

Key Issues:

- Practical Nurses often receive little recognition for their hard work.
- Hierarchical work environments discourage communication between Practical Nurses and other healthcare professionals.
- Lack of respect leads to a toxic work culture, making retention difficult.

Possible Solutions:

- Encouraging interdisciplinary collaboration to strengthen professional relationships.
- Implementing communication workshops to foster mutual respect.
- Recognizing and rewarding excellence in patient care among Practical Nurses.[26,27]

Global Perspectives on Practical Nursing Programs

Case Studies: Various countries have successfully adapted their Practical Nursing Programs to meet modern challenges. For instance (see Table 1)

United States: Certified Nursing Assistants (CNAs) in the U.S. are provided with opportunities for specialization, such as geriatric care or palliative care, which enhance their skill sets and career prospects. Additionally, bridge programs allow CNAs to transition into licensed practical nurse (LPN) or registered nurse (RN) roles, providing a clear pathway for advancement.[28]

Canada: Practical Nurses are part of interprofessional healthcare teams, with policies ensuring fair treatment and recognition.[28,29]

Sweden: Practical Nurses receive structured career pathways, including certification programs that allow them to advance to higher healthcare roles.[30]

Australia: The Aged Care Workforce Strategy Taskforce in Australia has implemented measures to upskill support staff, integrating digital training modules and creating mentorship programs to improve job satisfaction and retention.[28,31]

Japan: Facing an aging population, Japan has integrated advanced robotics and AI into caregiving roles, with Practical Nurses trained to operate these technologies, ensuring their relevance in a tech-driven healthcare environment.[32-34]

Based on the case studies, the U.S. 'Bridge Program' and Canada's model for creating interprofessional teams appear to have the most potential for adaptation in Thailand. This is because

they do not require a high technology budget like the Japanese model and instead focus on reforming the workforce structure and educational system key issues Thailand is currently facing.

Table 1 Summary of findings.

Country	PN Role Title	Training Duration	Career Pathways	Main Work Sectors
Thailand	Practical Nurses (PN)	1 year	Limited, Upskill PN	Rural health, eldercare, hospitals
USA	Licensed Practical Nurse (LPN)	1 year	RN bridge programs	Clinics, Long Term Care (LTC), home health
Canada	Licensed Practical Nurse (LPN)	2 year	Strong RN transition	Hospitals, nursing homes, rehabilitation centers, community health centers.
Sweden	Undersköterska (USK)	1.5 years	Strong RN transition	Public hospitals, LTC
Australia	Enrolled Nurse	18-24 months	Continuing education	Acute & community settings
Japan	Licensed Practical Nurse (LPN)	2-3 years	Elderly specialization	Eldercare, hospitals

Lessons Learned: These global case studies highlight several effective strategies for improving Practical Nursing Programs:

Retention Strategies: Competitive salaries, recognition programs, and flexible work schedules are crucial for retaining skilled workers.[3,6,35]

Professional Growth: Structured pathways for career advancement, including certifications and bridging opportunities to higher roles, foster long-term commitment.[36]

Integration into Healthcare Teams: Encouraging interdisciplinary collaboration and recognizing the vital role of Practical Nurses in patient care ensure their contributions are valued and respected.[11,35]

Adapting to Technology: Providing training on emerging healthcare technologies equips Practical Nurses to handle new challenges and remain relevant in a rapidly evolving field.[17,18]

Recommendations for Transforming the Practical Nursing Program

1. Policy Recommendations (for the Ministry of Public Health and the Nursing Council)

These policy recommendations aim to establish a stable foundation for the practical nursing profession. The primary focus is to establish a national standard for a "Career Ladder" policy, offering practical nurses a clear path for professional growth. This initiative should be supported by the development of a credit transfer system to facilitate continuing education. At the same time, it is crucial to review and adjust the compensation and welfare structure to ensure it is appropriate for the workload and responsibilities, thereby attracting and retaining high-quality personnel. [18]

Policy Advocacy: Governmental and institutional policies must prioritize the sustainability of Practical Nursing Programs. This includes funding for training, offering scholarships, and creating policies that mandate career development initiatives. [14] Healthcare organizations should advocate for regulatory changes that recognize the contributions of Practical Nurses and provide them with avenues for advancement. Collaboration between policymakers, educators, and healthcare providers is essential to implement these changes effectively. [3,8,18]

Enhanced Career Pathways:

To retain and attract talent, Practical Nursing Programs must offer clear career progression. Introducing advanced certifications in specialized areas like elder care, rehabilitation, or chronic disease management can enhance professional skills. Bridge programs that allow Practical Nurses to transition into higher roles, such as Licensed Practical Nurse (LPN) or Registered Nurse (RN), should be developed and promoted. Creating structured promotion opportunities within healthcare organizations will motivate Practical Nurses to remain in the profession and aspire for growth. [11,27,28]

Retention Strategies:

Improving compensation packages, including competitive salaries and benefits, is crucial for retaining Practical Nurses. Establishing mentorship programs where experienced professionals guide newcomers can create a supportive environment and reduce attrition. Recognizing and rewarding contributions through awards, public acknowledgment, or financial incentives can boost morale and job satisfaction.[35,36]

2. Recommendations for Educational Institutions Educational institutions should update their curricula to better align with the demands of the modern healthcare environment. This involves incorporating courses on digital literacy, soft skills such as communication and interpersonal relations, and specialized patient care for specific populations like the elderly or those with chronic diseases. It is also crucial for these institutions to collaborate with healthcare facilities to design practical training that places a strong emphasis on teamwork.

Innovative Training Models: Training programs should incorporate technology-focused modules to prepare Practical Nurses for the digital transformation of healthcare. This includes training on electronic health record (EHR) systems, telehealth platforms, and automated caregiving devices. Emphasizing soft skills such as communication, empathy, and teamwork can improve patient care and integration into interdisciplinary teams. Collaborative training with other healthcare professionals can foster mutual respect and enhance the Practical Nurses' role within the care continuum. [17,18]

3. Recommendations for Healthcare Facilities Healthcare facilities should create Individual Development Plans (IDPs) and support additional training opportunities to foster professional growth. At the same time, they should establish a mentorship program to support new practical nursing graduates and help them acclimate to the work environment. Finally, it is important to promote a "Respectful Workplace" policy through training and team-building activities, as this will help cultivate a positive and collaborative organizational culture. [24,25,26]

Fostering a Culture of Mutual Respect:

Implement policies that require inclusive team meetings where Practical Nurses can voice concerns.[24,25]

Encourage leadership to advocate for a culture of appreciation and acknowledgment.

Conduct anti-discrimination and professional respect training for all healthcare workers. [26]

4. Strategic Framework Consideration In an era of rapid change, the healthcare system is facing a critical challenge: ensuring its workforce is equipped to meet evolving demands. This narrative outlines a strategic framework to transform the practical nursing profession, a key component of Thailand's public health service system.

Our roadmap begins with a **short-term phase (0-12 months)** focused on laying the groundwork. We will form a collaborative committee of all stakeholders from government bodies like the Ministry of Public Health to educational institutions and healthcare facilities. Their primary goal is to conduct a thorough needs analysis to inform a national policy that establishes a clear career ladder for practical nurses. This initial phase carries the risk of a lack of stakeholder buy-in, which will be mitigated by hosting public forums and workshops to foster a shared vision.

Following this foundation-building phase, the **mid-term phase (1-3 years)** will shift to implementation and pilot programs. The newly formed committee will develop a modern curriculum that incorporates essential digital literacy and soft skills, as well as specialized patient care. Educational institutions and selected hospitals will then test this new curriculum and training model. The success of this phase will be measured by key indicators like the pilot program's

completion rate and the **digital competency pass rate** of graduates. We recognize the risk of resistance to change from current staff, so we will support them with continuous training and mentorship programs to ensure a smooth transition.

Finally, the **long-term phase (3-5 years)** is dedicated to scaling up and institutionalizing the reformed model nationwide. We will work to make the career ladder a national standard and establish formal credit transfer systems for further education. The long-term success will be judged by its impact on the system as a whole, specifically by a sustained increase in the **national retention rate** of practical nurses and a rise in their career advancement rates. We also aim to see an improvement in patient satisfaction scores, a key indicator of quality care. While insufficient long-term funding poses a risk, we will counter it by showcasing the successes of the pilot projects to secure ongoing financial commitment and support. [2,3,4,7]

The Ripple Effect: Organizational and Systemic Benefits

Healthcare Efficiency: Having a stable and high-quality practical nurse workforce not only helps reduce the workload of professional nurses but also serves as a crucial factor for Thailand to effectively cope with its aging society. This will also help the country achieve its national strategic goal of building a strong primary healthcare system. A well-supported Practical Nursing Program significantly enhances healthcare efficiency by alleviating the workload of registered nurses and other medical staff.[5]By handling routine tasks such as patient hygiene, mobility assistance, and basic monitoring, Practical Nurses enable nurses to focus on complex medical responsibilities, improving overall patient care and reducing burnout among healthcare teams. The streamlined delegation of tasks ensures a more organized and efficient healthcare delivery system.[11,25]

Cost-Effectiveness: Retaining trained Practical Nurses is far more cost-effective than continually recruiting and training new ones. High turnover rates lead to increased expenses in recruitment, onboarding, and training.[3] Conversely, investing in retention strategies and career development reduces these costs while maintaining a skilled and experienced workforce. A stable Practical Nurse workforce also minimizes disruptions in patient care, contributing to better healthcare outcomes and financial savings for institutions.[7, 35]

Community Impact: Strengthening the Practical Nurse workforce has profound benefits for underserved areas, where healthcare resources are often scarce. Practical Nurses play a vital role in extending healthcare services to these regions, providing essential care and improving access to medical support. By empowering Practical Nurses with better training, career opportunities, and recognition, healthcare systems can ensure that even remote and underserved communities receive

consistent and high-quality care. This not only enhances public health outcomes but also builds trust and resilience within communities.[12,19]

Improved Workplace Relationships:

- Encouraging team-building initiatives improves collaboration.

- Hospitals and clinics that foster mutual respect see higher job satisfaction and reduced turnover.

- Recognition programs enhance morale and engagement.[35]

Conclusion

Healthcare leaders must prioritize comprehensive reforms in the Practical Nursing program, focusing on key issues such as career progression, workplace culture, and professional recognition. A sustainable and adaptable Practical Nurse workforce should be fully integrated into healthcare teams as valued professionals, fostering mutual respect across all levels of the medical hierarchy.[1,2,3,33] To achieve this, stakeholders—including policymakers, educators, and healthcare organizations—must take urgent action to strengthen the Practical Nursing Program. This includes developing structured career pathways, enhancing training models, and advocating for improved working conditions. Addressing these systemic challenges will not only retain and empower Practical Nurses but also enhance the overall stability of the healthcare workforce.[3,5] A well-supported Practical Nursing Program can serve as a cornerstone of a resilient and efficient healthcare system. By investing in the development and recognition of Practical Nurses, the healthcare industry can ensure high-quality patient care while fostering professional growth, job satisfaction, and long-term workforce sustainability.[3,36,37]

Thus, investing in the reform of the practical nursing profession and its curriculum lays a strong foundation for the future of Thailand's healthcare system, ultimately resulting in a system that delivers high-quality patient care.

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