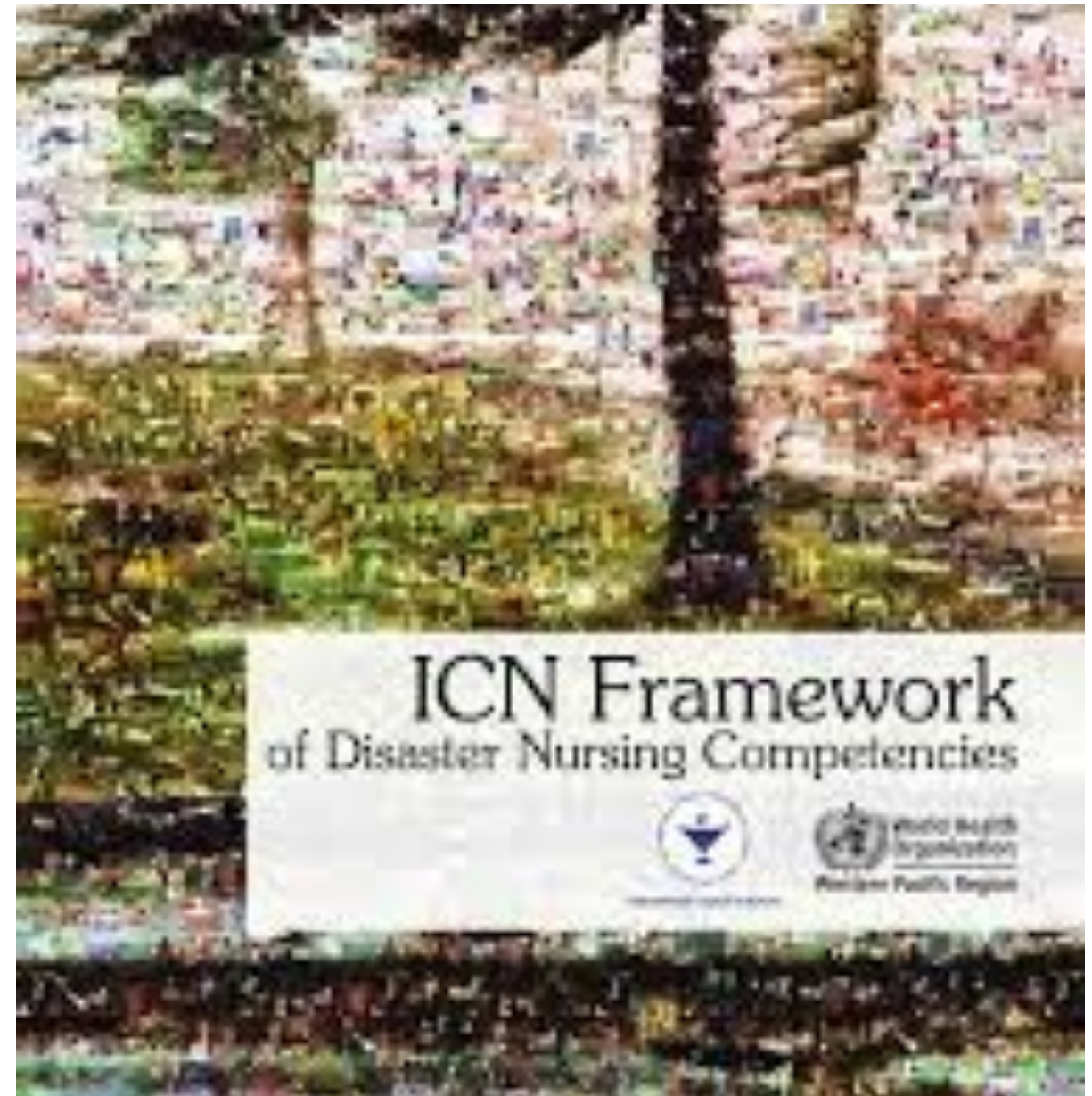

Why do disaster competencies matter?

*Professor Ally Hutton
University of Western Sydney,
Australia, November 2025*

Why Do Disaster Competencies Matter?

- Disasters are increasing in frequency and complexity.
- A common professional standard is needed
- Competencies strengthen preparedness, ensure effective response, and protect communities and nurses.
- They define knowledge, skills, and attitudes for crisis engagement.





Setting the scene.....



What are disaster competencies?



- Define structured **knowledge, skills, and attitudes** for effective disaster response
- Guide **education, practice, and policy**
- Ensure nurses can work **safely, ethically, and efficiently** in any crisis

Why do disaster competencies matter?

Key Reasons:

- Framework for readiness and confidence
- Standardize practice across contexts
- Support extended scope of practice
- Strengthen leadership and ethical decision-making





Every nurse is a disaster nurse

- Everyday nursing skills apply directly to disaster response
- Competence in routine practice underpins crisis management
- Preparedness is a professional responsibility

The cost of not being prepared



Inexperienced responders risk harm



Poor coordination and communication create chaos



Lack of preparation weakens recovery and increases trauma





National Emergency Preparedness Education Coalition (NEPEC)

Formed at **Vanderbilt University School of Nursing (US)** (represented 50 organizations)

Aimed to:

- Raise awareness
- Lead knowledge development
- Identify competencies
- Create educational resources
- Inform policy



The importance of 9/11

Conceptual development of competencies

- Literature review and synthesis of existing frameworks
- Expert panel refinement and validation
- Resulted in structured, evidence-based disaster competencies

11/12/2025





Core competency development

- Moved to University of Hyogo in Japan, who undertook the research needed to develop core competencies for disaster nursing.
- This research was undertaken in two stages:
 - first stage; the development of a framework of fundamental competencies
 - second stage; identification and structuring of curricular content
- All competencies included the same form – they all had to have 3 elements **knowledge, skills, and judgment**

Recognition by the WHO and the ICN

The ICN framework was developed with the broadest and most formally organized reference group and by that measure can be identified as the current gold standard in nursing. The original ICN preparedness competencies for nurses were framed in four broad areas:

- mitigation/prevention
- preparedness
- response
- and recovery/rehabilitation





2014- 5 review of the ICN Disaster Competencies

- After five years in print and a chance meeting with the ICN President - ICN and WADEM joined together in 2014 to review the competencies.
- The aim of the review was to determine how nurses used the competencies worldwide. We ensured we had representatives from each continent.
- Two main findings came from the review;
 - used for education
 - include psychosocial care of themselves and others

2015 Competency review - What did we find?

- educational purposes
- to inform and establish standards of care
- develop ethical/accountable practices for nurses
- plan organizational structure of associations
- develop disaster nursing competencies specific to :
country
- valued as the cornerstone of disaster education
- did not include psychosocial elements



2018 – 9

Project 2.0 to revise the ICN competencies was launched in mid 2018.

The vision for the project was that the ICN Disaster Competencies for Nurses form the benchmark for disaster nursing education.





Widening of domains

A few key decisions were made

- increasing the four domains to eight.
- to expand the level of the nurse from general registered nurse to include more than one level
- we established two other levels, level 2 senior nurses and level 3 for nurses who work in disasters.

Competency domains

Domain 1	Preparation and planning (actions taken apart from any specific emergency to increase readiness and confidence in actions to be taken during an event)
Domain 2	Communication (approaches to conveying essential information within one's place of work or emergency assignment and documenting decisions made)
Domain 3	Incident management systems (the structure of disaster/emergency response required by countries/organisations/institutions and actions to make them effective)
Domain 4	Safety and Security (assuring that nurses, their colleagues and patients do not add to the burden of response by unsafe practices)
Domain 5	Assessment (gathering data about assigned patients/families/communities on which to base subsequent nursing actions)
Domain 6	Intervention (clinical or other actions taken in response to assessment of patients/families/communities within the incident management of the disaster event)
Domain 7	Recovery (any steps taken to facilitate resumption of pre-event individual/family/community organisation functioning or moving it to a higher level)
Domain 8	Law and Ethics (the legal and ethical framework for disaster/emergency nursing)

Preparation and Planning

Domain 1: Preparation and Planning	
Maintains a general personal, family, professional preparedness plan	II.1.1 Participates with other disciplines in planned emergency drills/exercises at the institution or community level at least annually
Participates with other disciplines in drills/exercises in the workplace	II.1.2 Plans nursing improvement actions based on results of drill/exercise evaluation
Maintains up-to-date knowledge of available emergency resources, plans, roles and procedures	II.1.3 Communicates roles and responsibilities of nurses to others involved in planning, preparation, response and recovery
Describes approaches to accommodate vulnerable populations during an emergency disaster response	II.1.4 Includes actions relevant to needs of vulnerable populations in emergency plans
	II.1.5 Incorporates Level I core competencies in Disaster Nursing in any basic nursing education programme or refresher course



Communication



Domain 2: Communication	
I.2.1 Uses disaster terminology correctly in communication with all responders and receivers	II.2.1 Plans for adaptable emergency/disaster communications systems
I.2.2 Communicates disaster-related priority information promptly to designated individuals	II.2.2 Includes emergency communication expectations in all orientation of nurses to a workplace
I.2.3 Demonstrates basic crisis communication skills during emergency/disaster events	II.2.3 Collaborates with disaster leadership team(s) to develop event-specific media messages



Incident Management

DOMAIN 3: Incident Management	
I.3.1 Describes the national structure for response to an emergency or disaster	II.3.1 Participates in development of organisational incident plan consistent with national standards
I.3.2 Uses the specific disaster plan including chain of command for his/her place of education or employment in an event, exercise or drill	II.3.2 Participates with others in post-event (actual or exercise) evaluation
I.3.3 Contributes observations and experiences to post-event evaluation	II.3.3 Develops action plans for improvement in nursing practice based on event assessment
I.3.4 Maintains professional practice within licensed scope of practice when assigned to an inter-professional team or an unfamiliar location	II.3.4 Includes emergency planning guidance when reassigning staff or including unfamiliar colleagues or volunteers

Safety and security



AIN 4: Safety and Security	
Maintains safety for self and others throughout disaster/emergency event in both usual or austere environment(s)	II.4.1 Implements materials that support nursing decision-making that maintains safety during disaster/emergency events
Adapts basic infection control practices to available resources	II.4.2 Provides timely alternative infection control practices applicable within limited resources
Applies regular assessment of self and colleagues during disaster event to identify need for physical or psychological support	II.4.3 Collaborates with others to facilitate nursing access to medical and/or mental health treatment and other support services as needed
Uses PPE ⁹ as directed through the chain of command in a disaster/emergency event	II.4.4 Explains the levels/differences in PPE and indications for use to nurses and others
Reports possible risks to personal or others' safety and security	II.4.5 Creates an action plan to address and correct/eliminate risks to personal or others' safety and security

Assessment

GENERAL PROFESSIONAL NURSE	ADVANCED OR SPECIALIZED NURSE
MAIN 5: Assessment	
I.1 Reports symptoms or events that might indicate the onset of an emergency in assigned patients/families/communities	II.5.1 Assures that all nurses have up-to-date information on potential emergency events and the process for reporting them if observed
I.2 Performs rapid physical and mental health assessment of each assigned patient/family/community based on principles of triage and type of emergency/disaster event	II.5.2 Develops event-specific guidance on rapid physical and mental health assessment of individual patients/families/communities based on available information
I.3 Maintains ongoing assessment of assigned patient/family/community for needed changes in care in response to the evolving disaster event	II.5.3 Includes principles of disaster/emergency triage in all assessment courses taught in basic continuing education programmes
	II.5.4 Identifies event-specific vulnerable population(s) and actions needed to protect them



DOMAIN 6: Intervention	
I.6.1 Implements basic first aid as needed by individuals in immediate vicinity	II.6.1 Assures that emergency plans and institutional policy include the expectation that basic first aid can be administered by all nursing staff
I.6.2 Isolates individuals/families/clusters at risk of spreading communicable condition(s) to others	II.6.2 Includes organisationally specific guidance on implementation of isolation in an emergency
I.6.3 Participates in contamination assessment or decontamination of individuals when directed through the chain of command	II.6.3 Describes the range of CBRNE ¹⁹ exposure and the exposure-related decontamination methods to be used
I.6.4 Engages patients, their family members or assigned volunteers, within their abilities, to extend resources during events	II.6.4 Plans for expanded patient, patient's family or volunteer participation in extending resources in emergency/disaster plan
I.6.5 Provides patient care based on priority needs and available resources	II.6.5 Guides implementation of nursing reassignments within an organisation's emergency plan
I.6.6 Participates in surge capacity activities as assigned (e.g. mass immunisation)	II.6.6 Guides nursing participation in surge activities when required by event
I.6.7 Adheres to protocol for management of large numbers of deceased in respectful manner	



Intervention

Recovery

DOMAIN 7: Recovery	
I.7.1 Assists an organisation to maintain or resume functioning during and post event	II.7.1 Communicates nursing roles, responsibilities and needs to leadership throughout the recovery phase
I.7.2 Assists assigned patients/families/communities to maintain or resume functioning during and post event	II.7.2 Maintains up-to-date referral resource lists and adds event-specific modifications as needed
I.7.3 Makes referrals for ongoing physical and mental health needs as patients are discharged from care	
I.7.4 Participates in transition de-briefing to identify personal needs for ongoing assistance	





Law and ethics

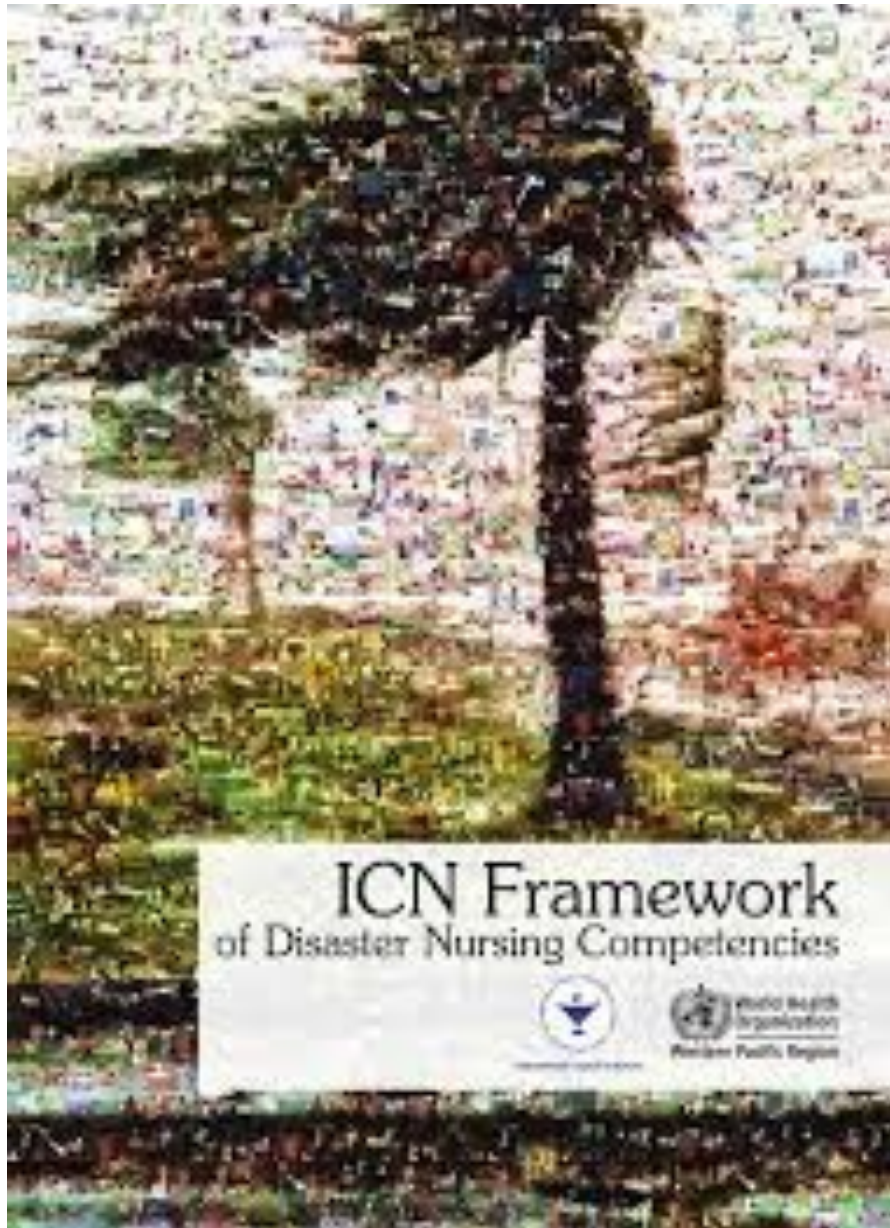
DOMAIN 8: Law and Ethics	
I.8.1 Practices within the applicable nursing and emergency-specific laws, policies and procedures	II.8.1 Participates in development of emergency-specific policy and procedure guidance for nurses within the organisation/institution
I.8.2 Applies institutional or national disaster ethical framework in care of individuals/families/communities	II.8.2 Participates in the development of disaster/emergency frameworks for allocation of resources (e.g. staff, supplies, medications)
I.8.3 Demonstrates understanding of ethical practice during disaster response that is based on utilitarian principles ¹¹	II.8.3 Develops guidance and support for nurses expected to apply utilitarian principles in practice during emergency and disaster response

**Competencies
are supposed
to be broad**



Different levels of competence

GENERAL PROFESSIONAL NURSE	ADVANCED OR SPECIALIZED NURSE®
Level I: any nurse who has completed a programme of basic, generalised nursing education and is authorised to practice by the regulatory agency of his/her country. Examples of Level I include staff nurses in hospitals, clinics, public health centres; all nurse educators.	Level II: any nurse who has achieved the Level I competencies and is or aspires to be a designated disaster responder within an institution, organisation or system. Examples of Level II include supervising or head nurses; nurses designated for leadership within an organisation's emergency plan; nurses representing the profession on an institution or agency emergency planning committee, preparedness/ response nurse educators.



Why Disaster Competencies Matter

- Supports and recognises the role of nurses in a disaster response
- Preparedness is a professional right for nurses
- Provides a framework for nurses
- Standardises care across countries and contexts
- Provides grounding for working under pressure

Concluding comments

- **Purpose:** Define the *knowledge, skills, and attitudes* nurses need before, during, and after disasters
- **Functions:** Guide *education, practice, and policy* to ensure safe, ethical, and efficient care
- **Benefit:** Reduce chaos by giving structure and situational awareness in crisis environments
- **Broad:** Designed to be *broad* because nursing roles in disasters are diverse
- **Starting Point:** Intended as a *starting point for engagement and dialogue*
- **The Cost of Not Being Prepared** - Lack of competencies leads to confusion, risk, and preventable harm
- **Competency:** Competent nurses are the difference between *organized response and chaos*.
- **Empowerment:** Disaster competencies matter because they **empower every nurse**—from novice to expert—to respond effectively, ethically, and safely in crisis. They transform uncertainty into structured, evidence-based action, strengthening global disaster resilience.

