

# Improving Specialty Certification in the Adult Emergency Department



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## Introduction or Purpose

- This Quality Improvement Project is to increase the number of Certified Nurses in the Emergency Department (ED) at our hospital.
- ED nurses are credentialed in emergency nursing, psychiatric nursing, and admission/Med-Surg nursing. We treat a diverse and complex group of patients and specialty certifications in each of these areas improve nursing competency and, therefore, patient safety.
- The Emergency Nurses Association (ENA) supports certification because it validates competence, supports safe and effective care, and helps meet licensure requirements.
- Specialty certification demonstrates a commitment to excellence.
- It establishes rigorous, standardized benchmarks for practice, enabling both regulators and healthcare organizations to set clear expectations for nursing performance.
- Nurses who achieve specialty certification frequently report increased empowerment, professional confidence, and job satisfaction compared to their non-certified peers.
- How certified nurses improves patient outcomes remains unclear. However, there are more certified nurses in Magnet Recognition Hospitals, which are associated with better patient outcomes.

## Design Setting

- Our hospital is a not-for-profit teaching hospital located in NYC
- We have an 89-bed ED that saw approximately 123,188 ED visits last year.
- We serve various patient populations including cancer care, behavioral health services, organ transplant, neurosurgical, cardiac care, and trauma care. We are a Comprehensive Stroke Center and a Certified Cardiac Center with emergency catheterizations capabilities.
- The ED has a Fast Track/Urgent Care area, three main medical-surgical areas, a critical care/resuscitation area, a Comprehensive Psychiatric Emergency Program (CPEP), and an admitted inpatient holding area.



## Materials and Methods

- Several strategies have been implemented to support and encourage RNs to achieve certification.
- We began by polling nurses on both day and night shift to identify if they would be interested in CEN (certified Emergency Nurse) review classes to help them prepare for their specialty certification.
- We polled Certified Psychiatric Nurse and Certified Med-Surg Certification candidates for their feedback.
- We concluded that the majority of RN's would be interested in review classes and would take advantage of specialty certification exam vouchers if offered.
- At the organizational level, all nurses are eligible to receive continuing education funding and paid time off for professional development.
- The Adult ED offers vouchers that fully cover the specialty certification exam fee for nurses who commit to obtaining certain CE requirements.
- Certified nurses receive an annual salary increase.
- Certification is required to advance on the clinical ladder, which provides an additional financial incentive.
- All nursing managers are strongly encouraged to hold CEN certification, reinforcing a culture that values professional credentialing.
- Nurses require 2 years of experience within their department to be eligible to sit for the exam.
- Several barriers have been identified, notably financial cost. Therefore, the department introduced a voucher program to cover the exam cost for nurses who commit to taking the test.
- The Clinical Nurse Educator meets with interested nurses to discuss their certification plan.
- Educational materials are also offered through sample questions and nurse-led certification preparation classes.
- These classes typically focus on a single exam topic, last approximately one hour, and offer CE credit.
- Sessions are offered at convenient times and as self-learning modules. Senior nurses teach classes.
- For nurses unable to attend either option, all sample questions and their rationales are emailed to the entire department.



## Results

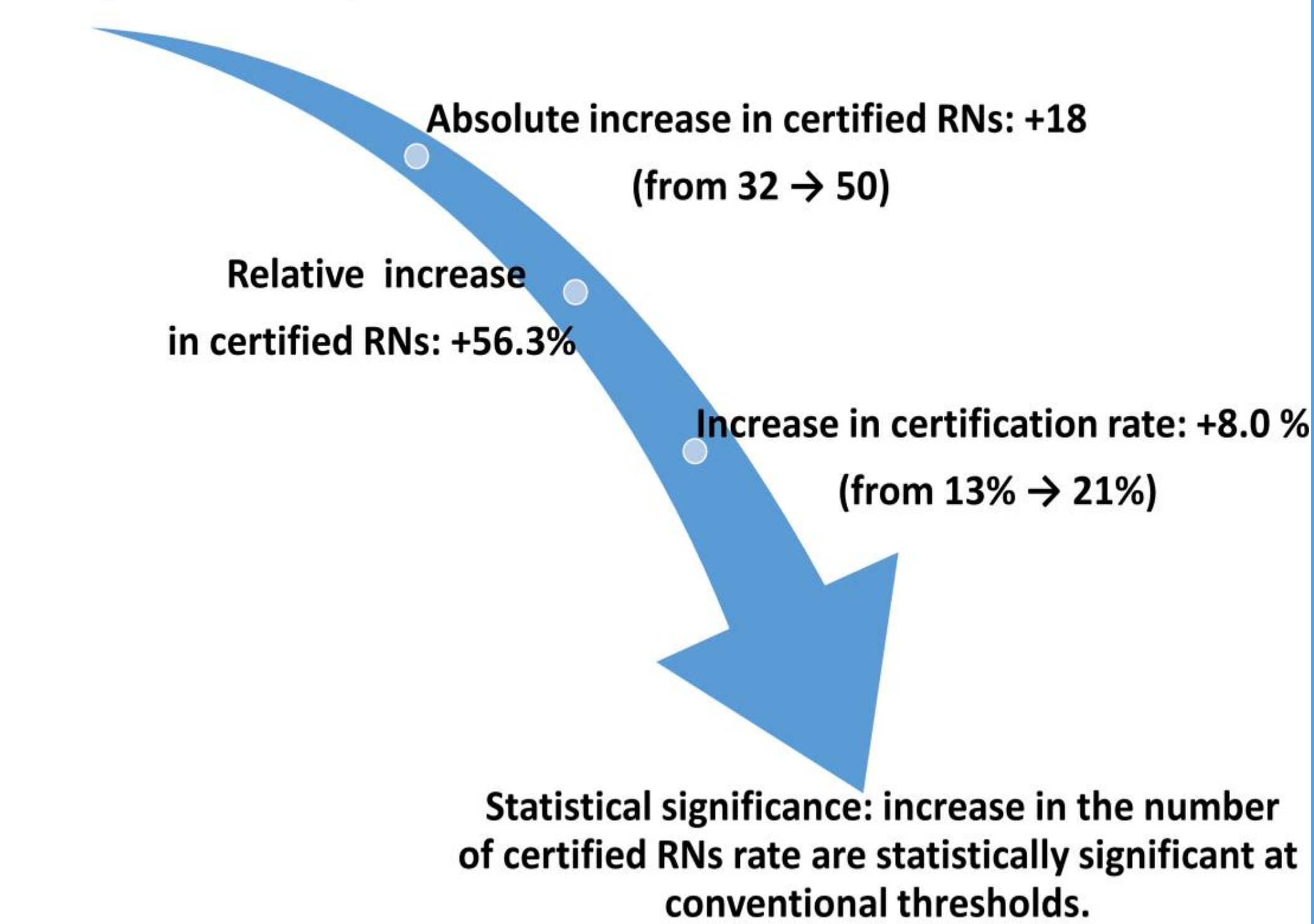
- In 2024, our department had 240 total nurses, including main ED nurses, psychiatric nurses, admitting nurses and nurses in management. Of these, 32 were certified in their respective fields.
- After implementation of the review classes and exam voucher initiatives during 2025, we had a total of 18 nurses become certified.
- This increase in certification from 32 to 50 (13% to 21%) demonstrated a statistically significant improvement ( $p \approx 0.029$ ).
- When analyzing the total number of RNs in the adult ED, a paired test demonstrates overwhelming statistical evidence of a true increase in certification rates ( $p \approx 0.0000076$ ).

TABLE

Year	Certified RNs (n)	New Certified (n)	% of RNs Certified	Notes
2024	32	0	13%	Baseline
2025	50	18	21%	Significant increases (see p-values below)

Statistical tests (for the change from 2024 → 2025):  
 Increase in certified RNs (count):  $p = 0.0029$   
 Increase in % of RNs certified overall:  $p = 0.0000076 (7.6 \times 10^{-6})$

## Key Takeaways



## Implications/ Conclusions

- Approximately one million registered nurses (RNs) or 20% of the total RN population hold Specialty certifications, and over 40,000 nurses hold a CEN
- This Quality Improvement Project clearly improved our department's certification numbers.
- We are a large, busy unit and at times continuing education and certification can be neglected.
- This project demonstrates how with consistent education and incentives, more nurses are likely to sit for the exam.
- Our Emergency Department's certification rate exceeds the national average.
- We continue to incentivize nursing staff through current programs, including vouchers, opportunities to participate in teaching in-person, and self-learning module review classes with free CEUs.
- RN's will be required to compete at least 6 self-learning modules to qualify for exam vouchers.
- We will continue to monitor certification rates in our department and make changes based on that information.

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### Key Takeaways

- Absolute increase in certified RNs: +18 (from 32 → 50)
  - Relative increase in certified RNs: +56.3%
  - Increase in certification rate: +8.0 percentage points (from 13% → 21%)
- Statistical significance: increase in the number of certified RNs rate are statistically significant at conventional thresholds.

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