Nurse-led continuity of care in multimorbidity patients: Strengthening the role of nurses in the patient healthcare system

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ABSTRACT

The rapid growth of aging populations and multimorbidity has transformed healthcare into a highly complex and fragmented system where patients frequently move across multiple clinical settings, including emergency departments, intensive care units, rehabilitation centres, outpatient clinics, and home-based care environments. These transitions represent vulnerable periods during which communication failures, incomplete handovers, fragmented coordination, and missed nursing care can significantly compromise patient safety, continuity of treatment, and long-term recovery outcomes. Contemporary evidence demonstrates that many adverse clinical outcomes are not solely caused by disease severity itself but rather by cumulative omissions in fundamental nursing care, especially during transitions between healthcare sectors.

This paper critically explores the phenomenon of missed nursing care within transitional care pathways and analyses the structural, organizational, and operational factors that contribute to invisible care gaps among multimorbid and high-risk patient populations. The discussion highlights how chronic understaffing, inadequate interprofessional collaboration, fragmented communication systems, poor discharge planning, weak continuity structures, and absence of formal transition management roles collectively undermine informational, relational, and management continuity across healthcare environments.

The paper further emphasizes the unique and strategic position of nurses within the healthcare system as continuity leaders capable of integrating patient-centred coordination, education, surveillance, advocacy, and long-term follow-up across the care continuum. Drawing upon contemporary nursing and healthcare transition literature, the study introduces the Nurse-Led Transition Safety Framework (NLTSF), a structured operational model designed to reduce missed care, improve communication accuracy, strengthen discharge readiness, and enhance post-discharge surveillance. The framework incorporates five key components: early risk identification, standardized bedside handovers, early discharge planning, interactive patient and family education, and proactive post-discharge follow-up mechanisms.

The proposed framework aims to strengthen patient safety, reduce avoidable hospital readmissions, improve medication management, enhance patient satisfaction, and support long-term self-management capabilities among multimorbid populations. Additionally, the paper discusses broader institutional and policy-level recommendations necessary to support nurse-led continuity systems, including workforce education, transition-focused clinical roles, integrated digital infrastructures, and evaluation models aligned with patient-centred outcomes. Ultimately, this analysis positions nurse-led transitional care as an essential strategy for building resilient, coordinated, and sustainable healthcare systems capable of managing modern care complexity effectively.

KEYWORDS: Nurse-led continuity of care; Multimorbidity; Transitional care; Missed nursing care; Care fragmentation; Patient safety; Continuity of care; Care coordination; Nurse-led transition safety framework (NLTSF); Discharge planning; Bedside handover; Post-discharge follow-up; Transitional care nursing; Healthcare system integration; Patient-centred care; Interprofessional communication; Medication safety; Readmission prevention; Nursing leadership; Chronic disease management.

INTRODUCTION, THEORATICAL FOUNDATIONS AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT

1.1 The Landscape of Modern Healthcare Complexity

In modern, increasingly complex healthcare environments, patients rarely remain stationary within a single clinical specialty, geographical unit, or treatment model. Driven by the rapid global expansion of aging demographics and the resulting rise of acute-on-chronic illnesses, individuals frequently navigate a complex network of distinct service points (Singh et al., 2026). Over a single episode of illness, a patient may move

rapidly among acute emergency departments, intensive care units, general medical-surgical wards, specialized outpatient diagnostic clinics, intermediate rehabilitation centres, and variable home care environments (McNair et al., 2016; Zuniga et al., 2024). Each of these operational movements represents a critical juncture where clinical responsibility, diagnostic data, complex medication regimens, and patient coping mechanisms must be securely synchronized (Coleman et al., 2007).

However, despite advanced medical specialization and technological progress, these transition points remain highly vulnerable to severe operational failures, communication breakdowns, and missed nursing care (Jones et al., 2015; Recio-Saucedo et al., 2018). As emphasized by contemporary nursing research, a substantial portion of patient complications, delayed recovery, and adverse outcomes does not stem solely from the biological severity of the underlying disease process (Kalisch et al., 2009). Instead, these challenges are frequently caused by small, cumulative, and uncoordinated omissions in care continuity—the "invisible care gaps" left behind when fundamental nursing actions are squeezed out during chaotic transition windows (Griffiths et al., 2018; Singh, 2026).

Nurses represent a highly strategic professional workforce within the healthcare ecosystem (Clarke et al., 2024). Their practice naturally connects continuous observation, relationship-building, therapeutic patient-family education, discharge planning, and interprofessional advocacy (Kitson et al., 2013). However, when systemic constraints within the broader healthcare infrastructure occur—such as episodic care delivery, task-oriented organizational nursing models, and a lack of formal care coordination roles—the continuity of the relationship is fractured multiple times across settings (Amorim-Lopes & Drach-Zahavy, 2019; Habermann et al., 2019). Consequently, essential components of fundamental care—such as verifying post-discharge medication tracking, reinforcing daily self-care capabilities, and executing complete shift handovers—are dropped (Ausserhofer et al., 2014; Kalisch & Williams, 2009).

1.2 The Evolution of Health Service Architecture

The historical evolution of patient delivery models reveals a deep-seated tension between narrow, single-disease medical management and holistic, person-centred nursing care (Jones et al., 2015). Traditional healthcare delivery was heavily structured around siloed acute bedsides, creating focused pathways for isolated episodes of treatment. This system architecture took shape during an era when infectious diseases and discrete surgical events dominated clinical care, allowing health systems to focus almost exclusively on stabilizing acute symptoms within a localized environment.

While highly effective for localized clinical stabilization, this single-unit focus breaks down entirely when applied to individuals dealing with complex, multi-provider trajectories (Singh et al., 2026). Under these legacy models, a patient may receive technically appropriate medical interventions inside an ICU or ward, yet face massive coordination deficits, lifestyle conflict, and severe safety risks when trying to execute separate directives across settings (Soohyun et al., 2022). The modern reality of multimorbidity demands a fluid infrastructure where information and clinical accountability flow alongside the patient, rather than remaining confined within distinct department walls (Zimmermann et al., 2023).

Furthermore, the concept of continuity of care requires a multi-dimensional definition within modern administrative structures, breaking down into three core dimensions: informational continuity, management continuity, and relational continuity (Coleman et al., 2007).

- **Informational Continuity** refers to the secure synchronization of clinical data, diagnostic histories, and medication changes across settings, ensuring that the patient's medical narrative is fully accessible to every provider involved in their care (Zimmermann et al., 2023).
- **Management Continuity** requires the establishment of a coherent, unconflicting treatment pathway across distinct specialists and sectors, preventing the delivery of contradictory clinical instructions (Jones et al., 2015).
- **Relational Continuity** represents the presence of an ongoing, therapeutic relationship between the patient and an identifiable clinician over time, providing a sense of predictability and security (Clarke et al., 2024).

In a high-velocity hospital or specialty environment, these dimensions are frequently overlooked by health systems that assume continuity occurs automatically if services are physically available (Suhonen & Scott, 2018). This administrative view represents a critical safety blind spot. Continuity does not happen by default; it must be actively organized through structured communication, systematic follow-up, and explicit responsibility for connecting care over time (Marguet & Ogaz, 2019). By treating continuity as a peripheral administrative concept rather than a core clinical and system goal, health systems inadvertently institutionalize invisible care gaps for vulnerable populations (Singh, 2026).

DETAILED PROLEM STATEMENT AND SYSTEMIC SCOPE

2.1 The Crisis of Fragmentation

The central challenge facing modern healthcare systems is the persistent vulnerability of transitioning and multimorbid patients to care fragmentation, excessive treatment burden, and inadequate cross-sector coordination (Singh et al., 2026). While administrative attention is routinely focused on short-term episodic outcomes, such as localized surgical success or immediate critical stabilization, the ongoing erosion of patient safety due to disconnected transition pathways receives far less oversight, despite posting an equal threat to system sustainability (Griffiths et al., 2018). This allows systemic care gaps to expand unnoticed beneath the surface of routine specialist consultations.

Patients encountering multiple care settings commonly face repeated assessments, conflicting treatment instructions, uncoordinated diagnostic procedures, and complete handoff breakdowns (Soohyun et al., 2022; Zimmermann et al., 2023). When operational limitations occur—such as chronic understaffing, weak interprofessional teamwork, and a complete absence of structured transition protocols—essential care delivery is systematically compromised (Aiken et al., 2002; Blackman et al., 2014).

These invisible care gaps have a direct, documented, and detrimental impact on patient well-being and health system responsiveness (Recio-Saucedo et al., 2018). The collected evidence demonstrates that these gaps contribute directly to:

- Fragmented service delivery and repeated, redundant diagnostic assessments that exhaust patient energy and institutional resources (Zimmermann et al., 2023).
- Conflicting treatment advice and dangerous medication errors, as polypharmacy regimens are altered across settings without centralized oversight (Soohyun et al., 2022).
- Severe treatment burden and psychological distress felt by patients and families who are forced to take on the overwhelming role of care coordinators (Jones et al., 2015).
- Inconsistent follow-up care and high rates of avoidable, high-cost hospital readmissions during vulnerable transition windows (Ausserhofer et al., 2014; Callen et al., 2004).
- Suboptimal physical and emotional adaptation, leading to lowered health-related quality of life and reduced confidence in self-management (Lake et al., 2016).

2.2 Systemic and Financial Implications

This problem is further aggravated because hospital administrators, financial structures, and healthcare policy models continue to judge care through narrow utilization and cost metrics (Pappas, 2008). By failing to recognize nurse-led care coordination and transition planning as a formal, accountable clinical discipline, institutions fail to allocate the staffing, time, and technological infrastructure required to connect acute care with community networks safely (Clarke et al., 2024; Singh, 2026). This systemic under-recognition allows care omissions to persist, accelerating patient deconditioning and driving up avoidable long-term healthcare utilization costs (Fisher et al., 2011; Pappas, 2008).

When a healthcare system operates on a transactional, volume-based financial model, the economic consequences of transition failures are often absorbed as standard operational overhead or passed on to public insurance programs (Pappas, 2008). A 30-day hospital readmission caused by a failure to clarify a complex medication change during discharge represents an unnecessary expenditure of thousands of dollars, a bed blocked from receiving an elective patient, and an avoidable trauma for the individual (Callen et al., 2004; Pappas, 2008).

The scope of this problem extends beyond institutional expenditures to encompass the global sustainability of the health workforce (Suhonen & Scott, 2018). Bedside nurses working within fragmented systems experience heightened levels of moral distress, job dissatisfaction, and professional burnout when they find themselves structurally blocked from delivering the complete, fundamental care their patients require (Aiken et al., 2002; Kalisch & Williams, 2009). The fragmentation of care transitions, therefore, operates as a dual crisis, undermining patient safety while eroding the stability of the clinical workforce (Ausserhofer et al., 2014; Kalisch et al., 2012).

TYPOLOGY AND DIMENSIONS OF MISSED NURSING CARE DURING TRANSITIONS

3.1 Understanding Omissions in Transition Pathways

To systematically analyse and address these clinical vulnerabilities, it is necessary to establish a clear typology of what constitutes "missed nursing care" within the pathways of complex patient trajectories (Jones et al., 2015; Kalisch et al., 2009). Missed care within transition pathways manifests predominantly across multiple dimensions of relational, informational, and management continuity (Coleman et al., 2007; Kalisch & Williams, 2009). When an institutional environment suffers from operational friction and departmental silos, care is typically rationed in a predictable hierarchy, where holistic patient functioning, treatment simplification, and cross-sector coordination are sacrificed to maintain immediate, episodic medical compliance (Amorim-Lopes & Drach-Zahavy, 2019; Habermann et al., 2019; Suhonen & Scott, 2018).

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The multi-dimensional nature of missed nursing care during transitions can be structurally mapped across five key operational domains (Jones et al., 2015; Kalisch et al., 2009):

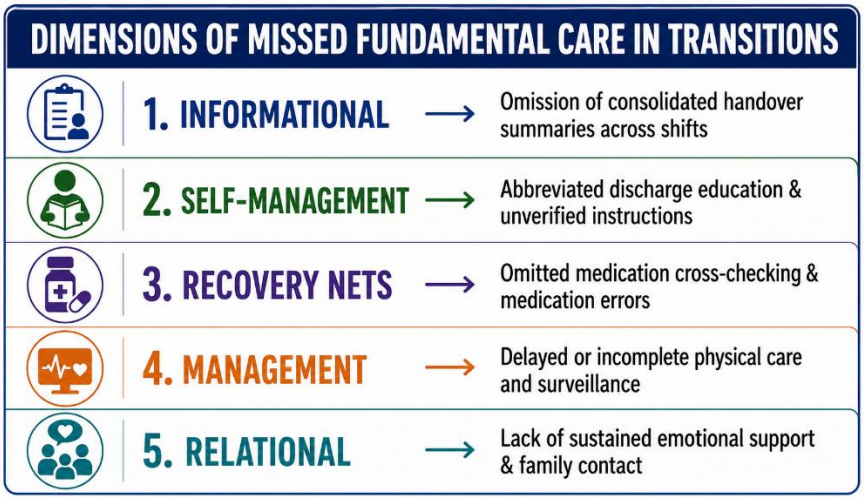


Figure 1: Dimensions of Missed Fundamental Care During Care Transitions

3.2 Key Operational Vulnerability Points

Across the patient's acute and post-acute timeline, five critical transition points exhibit the highest vulnerability to these care omissions (Griffiths et al., 2018; Singh, 2026):

A. Acute Hospital Admission and Initial Assessment

The initial phase of an acute hospital encounter represents a major risk point for transitioning patients. During this phase, missed nursing care frequently involves incomplete or rushed clinical assessments (Kalisch, 2006). When care is heavily task-oriented or rushed due to high patient acuity and low staffing, clinicians may document the primary reason for admission while omitting a comprehensive review of baseline functional capabilities, home environment risks, polypharmacy status, or prior treatment burdens (Kagnasky & Berner, 2005; Soohyun et al., 2022).

The nurse may find themselves forced to complete electronic documentation checklists that focus on liability metrics rather than exploring the patient's unique health literacy and care priorities (Kalisch & Williams, 2009). Consequently, separate medical teams treat independent issues, leaving the patient with a disjointed baseline plan of care that fails to anticipate long-term discharge needs (Jones et al., 2015; Singh et al., 2026).

B. Shift-to-Shift Handover Execution

Within the standard hospital unit, moving between nursing shifts represents a daily operational risk. Gaps occur when transferring clinicians fail to communicate subtle clinical observations, changing symptom trends, or specific family concerns due to incomplete or unstandardized handover protocols (Blackman et al., 2014; Kalisch, 2006). Essential elements such as tracking detailed physical status updates, reviewing subtle behavioral trends, or coordinating ongoing diagnostic preparation are frequently delayed or compromised when shift handovers are rushed, unstructured, or disconnected from the patient's bedside (Ball et al., 2014; Kalisch et al., 2009).

When handovers occur in isolated staff rooms rather than through active bedside engagement, the patient is excluded from their own care narrative, and opportunities to visually confirm safety metrics—such as intravenous patency, wound status, and cognitive baseline—are lost (Feo et al., 2017; Kitson et al., 2013).

C. Internal Transfer Between Distinct Units

Moving a patient internally between different hospital sectors (e.g., from the emergency department to an acute ward, or from a general ward to the ICU) introduces severe informational and clinical friction (McNair et al., 2016; Zimmermann et al., 2023). Care gaps occur when transferring clinicians fail to pass along critical tracking data, or when the receiving nurse lacks a consolidated, real-time overview of the total care trajectory (Coleman et al., 2007).

Vital monitoring steps, specialized medication passes, and therapeutic physical interventions are often delayed during internal unit shifts due to weak interprofessional communication and teamwork (Soohyun et al., 2022; Zimmermann et al., 2023). The patient's care plan is essentially reset with each physical relocation, forcing the receiving staff to reconstruct clinical priorities from fragmented digital records while the patient experiences immediate delays in receiving coordinated treatment (Jones et al., 2015).

D. Discharge Planning and Home Instruction Delivery

The process of preparing a patient to exit the acute hospital setting and return to the community is one of the most high-risk phases of care (Callen et al., 2004). Missed care during discharge typically involves

abbreviated, one-way information delivery (Kalisch et al., 2009). Due to compressed timelines, heavy workloads, and a lack of family involvement, nurses may simply distribute standard paperwork without conducting interactive validation (Ausserhofer et al., 2014; Lake et al., 2016).

Rushed explanations regarding complex medication changes, activity restrictions, and warning signs of clinical decompensation leave the patient unequipped for home recovery (Soohyun et al., 2022). When the nurse lacks the operational time to utilize structured educational techniques, such as teach-back verification, the patient leaves the facility with unaddressed misunderstandings that drive up treatment anxiety and readmission rates (Coleman et al., 2007; Lake et al., 2016).

E. Post-Discharge Follow-Up and Community Surveillance Net

The immediate post-discharge window represents a highly vulnerable period where minor self-care errors can quickly turn into acute emergency events (Callen et al., 2004). When healthcare systems lack structured, nurse-led mechanisms to monitor chronic or high-risk patients after they return home, early signs of clinical deterioration go undetected (Singh, 2026).

Worsening physical functioning, hidden treatment non-adherence, or adverse medication reactions go unmanaged due to a complete lack of long-term community follow-up (Singh et al., 2026). This operational gap forces patients to rely on avoidable emergency room visits to resolve minor complications that could have been easily intercepted through a proactive phone call or telehealth review (McNair et al., 2016; Pappas, 2008).

COMPREHENSIVE CONCEPTUAL MAPPING OF TRANSITIONAL GAPS

To understand why these care omissions, persist across modern health systems, it is necessary to examine the interplay of structural, environmental, and behavioral factors that create transitional care gaps (Amorim-Lopes & Drach-Zahavy, 2019). The following comprehensive conceptual map illustrates how organizational input failures lead directly to missed nursing coordination, resulting in a cascade of adverse patient and systemic outcomes (Griffiths et al., 2018; Kalisch et al., 2009; Recio-Saucedo et al., 2018).

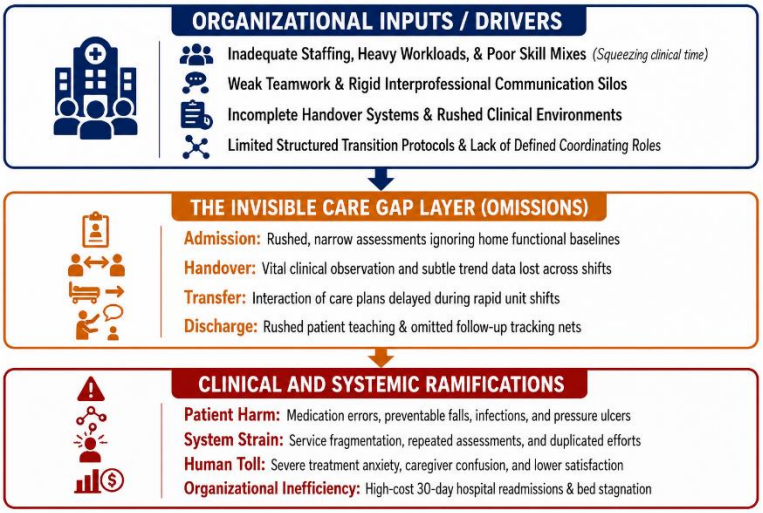


Figure 2: Organizational Drivers, Invisible Care Gaps, and Clinical Ramifications of Missed Fundamental Care During Care Transitions

STRUCTURAL AND CULTURAL DRIVERS OF MISSED NURSING CARE

5.1 Systemic Failures vs. Individual Negligence

Invisible care gaps in transition management are not caused by the negligence or apathy of individual bedside practitioners (Kalisch et al., 2009). Rather, they are the predictable consequence of structural, organizational, and cultural deficiencies built into the design of modern health-service environments (Amorim-Lopes & Drach-Zahavy, 2019). To develop effective interventions, we must critically analyse the primary systemic factors that drive care omissions for transitioning populations (Griffiths et al., 2018).

5.2 Deep-Dive into Structural Drivers

5.2.1 Chronic Understaffing, Poor Skill Mixes, and Compounded Workloads

The primary operational driver of care fragmentation is the pervasive mismatch between patient care demands and available nursing resources (Aiken et al., 2002; Kalisch et al., 2012). When acute units operate under chronic staffing shortages and inadequate skill mixes, bedside nurses face heavy workloads and high patient acuity (Ausserhofer et al., 2014; Cho et al., 2020). Forced to manage competing clinical priorities under intense time compression, nurses must implicitly ration their care (Habermann et al., 2019; Suhonen & Scott, 2018).

In these high-pressure environments, holistic transition components—such as cross-checking shift

handovers, conducting extended discharge counselling, and updating family members—are systematically delayed or omitted to maintain immediate, life-sustaining biomedical tasks (Kalisch & Williams, 2009; Kalisch et al., 2009). The rationing of care becomes a psychological defence mechanism for survival under chronic resource constraints, but it directly undermines the safety margins necessary for smooth transitions (Griffiths et al., 2018).

5.2.2 Weak Interprofessional Communication, Teamwork, and Professional Silos

Transition care requires smooth, continuous communication among physicians, nurse specialists, clinical pharmacists, physical therapists, and primary care networks (Zimmermann et al., 2023). However, clinical practice remains plagued by rigid professional silos and weak interprofessional teamwork (Amorim-Lopes & Drach-Zahavy, 2019). Medical consultants often make isolated modification decisions during brief rounds without engaging the nursing staff who must execute and translate these directives for the family (Soohyun et al., 2022).

When departments operate as isolated operational structures, vital clinical intelligence is lost during handoffs (Coleman et al., 2007). If communication channels between acute sectors and community primary care networks are blocked, critical tracking info slips through the gaps unnoticed, leaving transitioning patients caught between conflicting medical directives (Jones et al., 2015).

5.2.3 Incomplete Handover Systems and Rushed Transition Mechanics

A major barrier to achieving consistent safety during transfers is the historical reliance on unstandardized, rushed handover methodologies (Blackman et al., 2014). Handovers between clinical shifts or hospital units frequently rely on fragmented verbal checklists or informal scrap notes that fail to capture the patient's comprehensive functional capabilities, cognitive status, or pending diagnostic adjustments (Kalisch, 2006; Kalisch et al., 2009).

Because health systems often fail to mandate structured, objective communication tools within the electronic health record, data regarding tracking metrics, localized care preferences, and clinical risks are left out during rapid department transfers (Kalisch & Williams, 2009). The culture of treating handovers as a low-priority administrative chore rather than a high-risk clinical procedure accelerates the loss of critical surveillance data (Ball et al., 2014).

5.2.4 Absence of Structured Transition Protocols and Insufficient Role Integration

Despite clear evidence demonstrating the value of integrated care management, transition protocols remain inconsistently implemented across the globe (Coleman et al., 2007; Suhonen & Scott, 2018). Many healthcare systems continue to structure nursing solely as a localized, shift-bound function tied strictly to a specific acute unit or bed (Clarke et al., 2024). Because institutions fail to embed structured transition protocols and cross-sector care plans, critical handoff safety checks are left as an informal extension of care (Kalisch et al., 2009).

Without designated coordination roles—such as transition coaches, nurse navigators, or cross-sector case managers—and clear institutional pathways, transition safety cannot be sustained, and responsibility for connecting care remains undefined (Marguet & Ogaz, 2019; Singh, 2026).

THE IMPERATIVE FOR NURSES AS CONTINUITY

6.1 The Unique Positioning of the Nursing Profession

A central tenet of this analysis is that the nursing profession is uniquely positioned to address and eliminate care fragmentation across transitions (Clarke et al., 2024; Kitson et al., 2013). Within the healthcare ecosystem, nurses maintain the closest, most continuous contact with patients and family caregivers, naturally bridging the gaps among clinical, educational, relational, and organizational functions (Feo et al., 2017).

This continuous presence provides nurses with an intimate understanding of the patient's baseline capabilities, self-management barriers, and real-world recovery trajectories (Lake et al., 2016). Unlike specialized medical consultants who enter the patient's room for discrete, episodic interventions, the nurse observes the patient over extended intervals, catching the subtle trends in functional status, cognitive clarity, and emotional coping that indicate a transition is succeeding or failing (Kalisch, 2006; Zang et al., 2020).

6.2 Redefining Professional Identity

To permanently close invisible care gaps, contemporary healthcare organizations must shift their cultural and operational perception of the nursing workforce (Clarke et al., 2024). Healthcare leadership must move away from viewing the nurse as an episodic, unit-bound provider confined to a specific bedside. Instead, health systems must formally recognize, empower, and fund the nurse as a *continuity leader* who actively designs, controls, and protects integrated care pathways across the entire patient journey (Marguet & Ogaz, 2019; Singh, 2026).

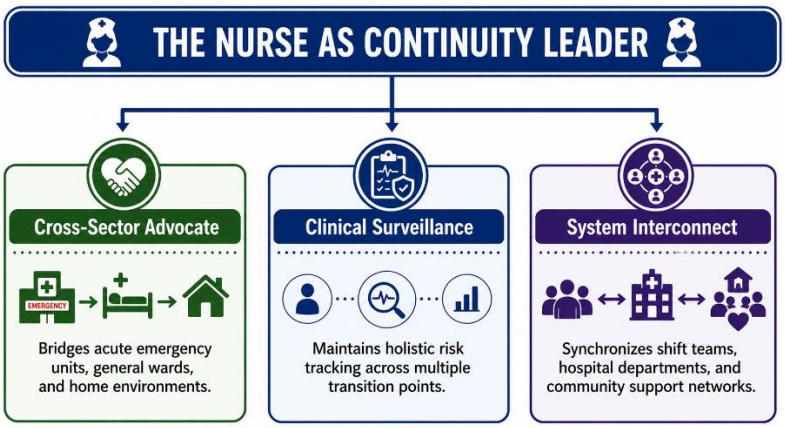


Figure 3: The Nurse as Continuity Leader in Transitional Care Coordination

As continuity leaders, nurses serve as the primary defensive shield against systemic fragmentation (Kitson et al., 2013). They do not merely execute task-oriented procedures; they actively coordinate services, simplify treatment transitions, reinforce patient understanding, and ensure that care remains focused on the individual's personal goals and daily functioning rather than separate organ systems (Jones et al., 2015; Zang et al., 2020). By leading interprofessional care coordination and transition planning, nurses ensure that safety, dignity, and clinical quality are maintained over time and across settings, making nurse-led models an essential design principle for modern healthcare systems (Clarke et al., 2024; Peter et al., 2022). This leadership requires a shift in professional identity, where the scope of practice is understood to extend beyond physical unit boundaries into the cross-sector coordination space (Marguet & Ogaz, 2019).

THE PROPOSED NURSE-LED TRANSITION SAFETY FRAMEWORK (NLTSF)

7.1 Framework Overview and Core Philosophy

To translate these conceptual principles into standard clinical practice, this paper introduces the **Nurse-Led Transition Safety Framework (NLTSF)** tailored specifically to eliminate care omissions and enhance healthcare system responsiveness (Singh, 2026). This framework provides a structured, evidence-based operational template designed to close invisible care gaps. The NLTSF is constructed around five core operational components that must be integrated into the daily workflow of acute and community care environments, ensuring that safety checkpoints are systematically embedded throughout the patient's movement across settings (Feo et al., 2017; Kitson et al., 2013).

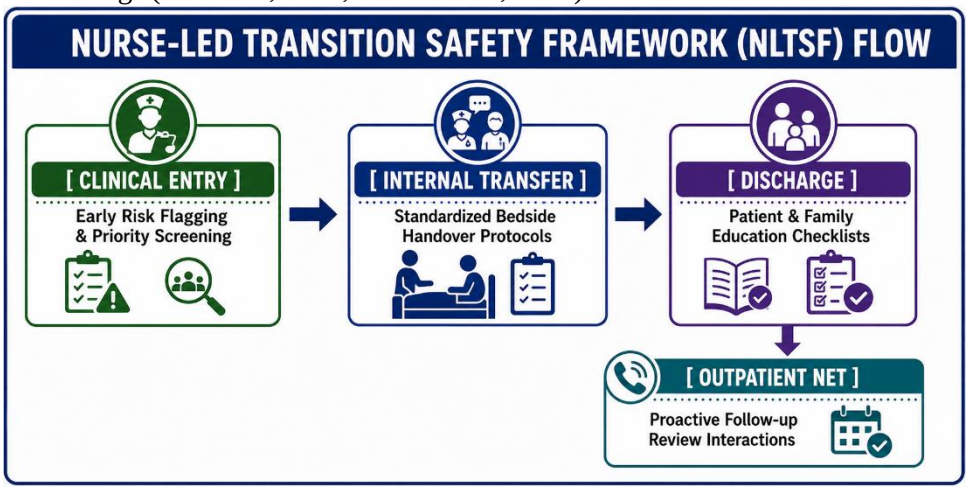


Figure 4: Nurse-Led Transition Safety Framework (NLTSF) Flow Across the Care Continuum

7.2 Core Components of the NLTSF

Component 1: Early Risk Flagging and Personal Priority Screening

The NLTSF mandates that upon clinical entry or admission, patients—especially frail, elderly, and chronic disease cohorts—undergo immediate risk screening (Kagnasky & Berner, 2005; Zang et al., 2020). This protocol requires the nurse to evaluate the patient's baseline daily functioning, cognitive capacity, social support structures, and transition history (Kalisch et al., 2009). Crucially, this component involves identifying the patient's personal healthcare priorities from day one.

By establishing a clear understanding of the individual's total living situation and clarifying what matters most to them (e.g., preserving mobility, returning home independently, or managing pain), the nurse can prevent task-oriented fragmentation and ensure all subsequent interventions align with the patient's real-

world capabilities and personal values (Kitson et al., 2013).

Component 2: Standardized Bedside Handover Protocols

To eliminate the danger of clinical information loss during shift changes or department moves, the framework implements Standardized Bedside Handover Protocols (Blackman et al., 2014). This protocol mandates that all shift-to-shift and unit-to-unit transfers be conducted actively at the patient's bedside, involving the patient and family directly as active partners (Feo et al., 2017; Kalisch et al., 2009).

The transferring and receiving nurses utilize a structured communication synthesis (e.g., an advanced, transition-specific adaptation of the SBAR format) to verify the patient's immediate physical tracking data, review pending diagnostic tasks, cross-check the medication list, and manage localized transition risks (Kalisch, 2006). This active, visual verification ensures a single, coherent care plan is maintained across internal shifts, completely removing the reliance on fragmented verbal messages passed outside the patient's room (Ball et al., 2014).

Component 3: Early Discharge Planning Execution

The framework requires that discharge planning be initiated immediately upon admission rather than being delayed until the day of exit (Callen et al., 2004). Led by a designated nurse coordinator, this component involves establishing clear multi-sector communication pathways, identifying post-acute resource needs, and coordinating scheduling with outpatient networks early in the clinical stay (Ausserhofer et al., 2014; Marguet & Ogaz, 2019).

By executing discharge planning continuously throughout the hospital encounter, the nursing team can systematically address potential social, physical, and environmental discharge barriers, clear administrative bottlenecks, and prevent rushed, chaotic community handovers that leave families feeling overwhelmed and abandoned (Coleman et al., 2007; Lake et al., 2016).

Component 4: Interactive Patient and Family Education Checklists

To counter the problem of patients experiencing confusion and poor treatment adherence after leaving the facility, the NLTSF requires the execution of interactive Patient and Family Education Checklists (Kalisch et al., 2009). This component moves away from generic, text-heavy discharge paperwork, replacing it with structured, nurse-verified checklists tailored to the patient's specific health literacy and cognitive status (Lake et al., 2016).

The nurse uses practical self-management validation techniques, such as the "teach-back" method, to clarify complex medication tracking schedules, activity limitations, and red-flag symptoms (Coleman et al., 2007). Before discharge is authorized, the patient or family caregiver's understanding and capability to execute care must be formally validated and documented, ensuring they are equipped for safe home recovery (Ausserhofer et al., 2014).

Component 5: Proactive Follow-Up and Community Surveillance Net

The final component of the framework establishes an ongoing, proactive surveillance structure to support long-term care in the community, bridging the dangerous gap between acute discharge and primary care reassessment (Callen et al., 2004; Coleman et al., 2007). The Post-Discharge Net mandates that a designated transition nurse conduct structured follow-up interactions (via telehealth calls or nurse-led clinic reviews) within 48 to 72 hours of discharge (Ausserhofer et al., 2014; McNair et al., 2016).

During these interactions, the nurse actively monitors for early signs of clinical deterioration, reviews medication adherence, answers emerging self-care questions, and confirms that connection with primary care services has been maintained (Singh et al., 2026). This continuous net prevents minor recovery declines from escalating into emergency room readmissions (Pappas, 2008).

ALIGNMENT OF TRANSITION PHASES, MISSED CARE RISKS AND FRAMEWORK INTERVENTIONS

To ensure effective clinical execution, the following matrix aligns each phase of the patient journey with its specific missed care risks and the corresponding interventions defined within the Nurse-Led Transition Safety Framework (Singh, 2026):

Table 1. Transitional Care Risks, NLTSF Intervention Mechanisms, and Targeted Patient Safety Outcomes Across Care Phases

Transition Phase	Specific Missed Care Risks	NLTSF Intervention Mechanism	Targeted Safety Outcome
Clinical Entry & Assessment	Narrow, disease-focused records; ignoring coexisting conditions and	Early Risk Flagging and Personal Priority Screening protocols	Comprehensive baseline profile integrating patient risks and functional

Transition Phase	Specific Missed Care Risks	NLTSF Intervention Mechanism	Targeted Safety Outcome
	home functional baselines (Soohyun et al., 2022).	(Kagnasky & Berner, 2005; Zang et al., 2020).	capabilities.
Shift-to-Shift Handovers	Loss of clinical data trends, missed tracking metrics, rushed communication (Blackman et al., 2014).	Standardized Bedside Handover Protocols involving patients (Feo et al., 2017; Kalisch, 2006).	Complete synthesis of clinical tracking data and active care plan alignment.
Department Unit Transfers	Broken interprofessional handoffs, delayed treatment passes, tracking gaps (Coleman et al., 2007; Zimmermann et al., 2023).	Early Discharge Planning and structured multi-sector coordination (Ausserhofer et al., 2014; Marguet & Ogaz, 2019).	Coherent, unified management plan across distinct specialist medical teams.
Discharge Execution	Rushed patient teaching, unverified home readiness, confusing schedules (Kalisch et al., 2009).	Interactive Patient and Family Education Checklists (Coleman et al., 2007; Lake et al., 2016).	Verified patient and caregiver capability to navigate complex regimens at home.
Post-Discharge Care	Unmonitored symptom flare-ups, medication errors, treatment non-adherence (Singh et al., 2026).	Proactive Follow-Up Net (telehealth calls and nurse reviews) (McNair et al., 2016; Pappas, 2008).	Early detection of recovery complications and direct prevention of 30-day readmissions (Ausserhofer et al., 2014; Callen et al., 2004).

COMPREHENSIVE CLINICAL ANALYSIS OF SYSTEMIC OUTCOMES

9.1 Multi-Level Vulnerability Mitigation

Implementing the Nurse-Led Transition Safety Framework (NLTSF) across healthcare organizations yields substantial and measurable benefits that extend across multiple dimensions of the healthcare system, including patient safety, clinical efficiency, workforce sustainability, continuity of care, and patient-perceived quality of healthcare services. By systematically embedding structured transition management processes into routine clinical workflows, the framework directly addresses the invisible care gaps that commonly emerge during movement between healthcare settings, thereby strengthening the overall integrity and responsiveness of modern healthcare systems.

One of the most significant outcomes of the NLTSF is the enhancement of clinical safety throughout the patient care continuum. Transitions between departments, providers, and care environments are widely recognized as high-risk periods where communication failures, medication discrepancies, incomplete documentation, and missed nursing interventions frequently occur. The implementation of structured bedside handovers, proactive surveillance mechanisms, and standardized communication protocols within the framework significantly reduces the likelihood of these errors. Nurses functioning as continuity leaders are able to identify subtle clinical deterioration early, ensure accurate transfer of patient information, verify medication regimens, and maintain uninterrupted therapeutic monitoring across settings. As a result, healthcare organizations experience reductions in preventable adverse events such as falls, hospital-acquired infections, medication-related complications, delayed interventions, and avoidable clinical deterioration (Peter et al., 2022; Singh, 2026).

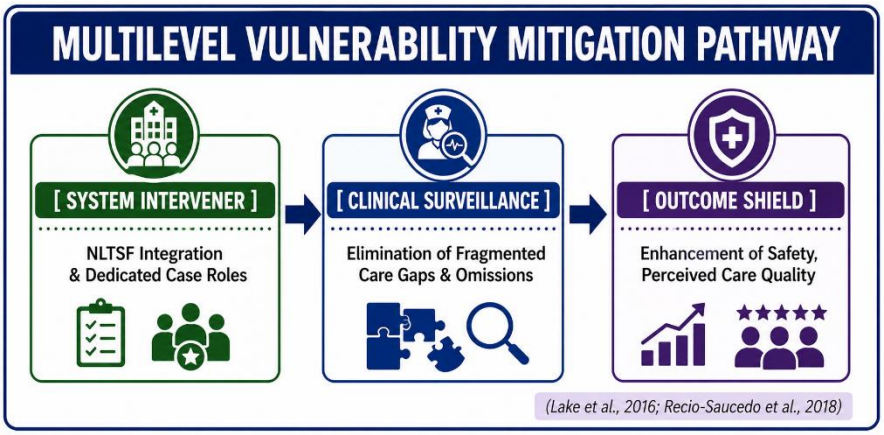


Figure 5: Multilevel Vulnerability Mitigation Pathway Through the Nurse-Led Transition Safety Framework (NLTSF)

9.2 Deep-Dive into Clinical Outcomes

A. Enhancement of Patient Safety and Reduction of Adverse Events

By systematically eliminating invisible care gaps through structured bedside handovers and transition screening, the NLTSF delivers major improvements in primary safety metrics (Recio-Saucedo et al., 2018; Singh, 2026). Moving to models that prioritize standardized nursing surveillance ensures that risk indicators are caught early (Feo et al., 2017).

Evidence from clinical reviews demonstrates that these nurse-led transition interventions produce their most consistent benefits in suppressing preventable complications (Ausserhofer et al., 2014; Griffiths et al., 2018). Active bedside handovers and continuous tracking directly reduce the incidence of patient falls, hospital-acquired infections, and severe skin breakdown during acute admissions by maintaining a rigorous, uncompromised baseline of protective care (Fisher et al., 2011; Lake et al., 2016; Peter et al., 2022).

B. Significant Improvement in Medication Tracking and Prevention of Errors

Medication adjustments occur frequently during transitions between units and sectors, making patients highly vulnerable to dangerous medication-related events, such as duplicate therapies, omission of chronic therapies, or incorrect dosing (Soohyun et al., 2022). The intensive medication cross-checking and structured checklists built into the framework provide an essential safety shield (Coleman et al., 2007).

Bedside verification and coordinated transition tracking ensure that medication discrepancies are intercepted before the patient crosses sectors (Kalisch, 2006). This focused nursing oversight leads to significant improvements in long-term medication adherence and home safety, directly preventing adverse drug events during the post-acute phase (Ausserhofer et al., 2014; Recio-Saucedo et al., 2018).

C. Strengthening of Communication and Patient-Perceived Quality of Care

One of the most frequent complaints from transitioning patients is the confusing, contradictory, and fragmented communication they experience when navigating multiple independent services (Jones et al., 2015). The assignment of a dedicated nursing continuity leader provides an essential communication anchor for the patient and the multidisciplinary team (Marguet & Ogaz, 2019).

Nurses facilitate clear information flow, translate complex medical jargon into actionable recovery steps, and coordinate goals across acute and community sectors (Kitson et al., 2013; Zimmermann et al., 2023). This active coordination yields consistent improvements in patient-perceived quality of care and communication quality, transforming a chaotic transition into an organized, supportive experience (Lake et al., 2016).

D. Empowerment and Elevation of Self-Management Skills

Long-term health recovery depends heavily on the capacity of patients and their family caregivers to accurately manage complex treatments and lifestyle adjustments at home (Callen et al., 2004; Singh et al., 2026). The interactive education checklists and tailored counselling techniques used within the NLTSF actively build this capacity (Kalisch et al., 2009).

Rather than treating patients as passive recipients of written instructions, the framework focuses on patient empowerment and practical skill building through validated comprehension exercises (Coleman et al., 2007; Lake et al., 2016). This focused support enables families to accurately recognize early warning signs of clinical decompensation, navigate outpatient follow-ups, and manage recovery paths with high confidence (Ausserhofer et al., 2014).

E. Reduction of Unnecessary Healthcare Utilization and Readmissions

While evidence on long-term cost reduction and absolute mortality metrics remains mixed due to the high complexity of clinical cohorts, transitional care and coordinated nurse-led models show strong promise for

reducing short-term system strain (Ausserhofer et al., 2014; Singh et al., 2026). The intensive screening, pre-discharge validation, and early post-discharge tracking built into the NLTSF handle complications before they worsen (McNair et al., 2016). Well-implemented nurse-led transitional care interventions can produce substantial improvements in utilization-related outcomes, effectively lowering avoidable emergency room visits and 30-day hospital readmissions, thereby maximizing bed availability and reducing institutional gridlock (Ausserhofer et al., 2014; Callen et al., 2004; Pappas, 2008).

STRATEFIC IMPLEMENTATION RECOMMENDATIONS

To successfully transition from theoretical concepts to widespread and sustainable clinical implementation, healthcare organizations, academic institutions, nursing leadership bodies, and health policymakers must work collaboratively to establish comprehensive systemic reforms that strengthen continuity of care across all healthcare sectors (Clarke et al., 2024; Singh, 2026). The growing complexity of multimorbidity, aging populations, fragmented service delivery systems, and increasing treatment burdens demands a coordinated transformation that moves beyond isolated pilot programs toward institution-wide integration of nurse-led transitional care models. Without deliberate structural support, even the most evidence-based continuity frameworks risk remaining conceptual ideals rather than becoming embedded components of everyday clinical practice.

Healthcare systems must recognize that transitional care safety cannot be achieved through isolated bedside efforts alone. Instead, it requires a synchronized approach involving administrative restructuring, workforce development, interprofessional collaboration, educational reform, digital infrastructure modernization, and policy-level accountability mechanisms. Continuity of care must be reframed as a core institutional quality and patient safety objective rather than being treated as an informal extension of routine nursing responsibilities. This transformation requires leadership commitment to redesigning operational systems so that communication, discharge planning, follow-up surveillance, and patient education become formally protected and measurable components of care delivery.

At the organizational level, healthcare institutions must formally establish nurse-led transition management as a recognized clinical specialty supported by dedicated funding, staffing structures, and institutional policies. Many healthcare systems continue to function through episodic, department-centred operational models that unintentionally encourage fragmentation and disconnected care pathways. To address this limitation, organizations must create structured coordination systems that support the continuous movement of patients across acute care, rehabilitation, outpatient services, and home-based recovery environments. The creation of designated transition nurse roles, nurse navigators, case managers, and post-discharge coordinators is essential for ensuring accountability and maintaining consistent oversight throughout the patient journey.

Simultaneously, academic institutions and nursing education programs play a critical role in preparing the future nursing workforce to function effectively within increasingly integrated healthcare systems. Traditional nursing curricula have often emphasized localized bedside technical competencies while providing comparatively limited exposure to transitional care coordination, interprofessional communication strategies, discharge safety planning, and long-term continuity management. Modern nursing education must therefore evolve to incorporate advanced transition safety frameworks, structured bedside handover methodologies, collaborative decision-making models, chronic disease navigation strategies, and patient-centred communication skills into both undergraduate and postgraduate training programs. Nursing students must be prepared not only to deliver direct clinical interventions but also to function as continuity leaders capable of managing complex patient trajectories across multiple healthcare sectors.

Nursing leadership organizations and healthcare administrators must also advocate for cultural transformation within healthcare environments. Historically, continuity work has often been invisible, undervalued, and overshadowed by task-oriented biomedical priorities. However, the evidence increasingly demonstrates that failures in communication, discharge preparation, follow-up monitoring, and coordinated management contribute significantly to preventable adverse outcomes and rising healthcare costs. Nursing leaders must therefore promote organizational cultures that recognize care coordination, patient advocacy, and transitional surveillance as essential dimensions of professional nursing practice. This includes empowering nurses to participate actively in interdisciplinary planning discussions, clinical governance initiatives, policy development, and system redesign processes.

In addition, healthcare systems must invest in interprofessional infrastructure capable of supporting seamless communication and synchronized care pathways. Fragmentation frequently occurs because healthcare providers across departments and sectors operate through disconnected documentation systems, inconsistent referral mechanisms, and weak communication channels. The implementation of integrated digital care plans, standardized transfer protocols, shared electronic health records, and coordinated referral pathways

can substantially improve informational continuity and reduce transition-related errors. Technology-supported communication systems allow clinicians across acute and community settings to access accurate patient histories, monitor treatment progress, verify medication changes, and coordinate recovery goals more effectively.

Another critical area requiring transformation involves the redesign of institutional evaluation frameworks and quality indicators. Many healthcare systems continue to prioritize narrow utilization-based metrics such as bed turnover rates, procedural volumes, and short-term hospitalization outcomes while overlooking patient-centred indicators related to continuity, communication quality, functional recovery, and treatment burden. To support sustainable implementation of nurse-led continuity systems, organizations must adopt broader evaluation strategies that regularly monitor missed nursing care indicators, patient satisfaction levels, readmission trends, discharge preparedness, medication safety outcomes, and quality-of-life measures. These metrics provide a more comprehensive understanding of healthcare effectiveness and help validate the long-term value of integrated transitional care models.

Furthermore, successful implementation requires long-term investment in workforce sustainability and staffing adequacy. Chronic understaffing and excessive workloads remain major contributors to care omissions and fragmented transitions. Healthcare institutions must ensure that nurses have sufficient protected time, manageable workloads, and adequate staffing resources to conduct comprehensive assessments, bedside handovers, discharge counselling, and post-discharge follow-up activities effectively. Without structural workforce support, transition-related responsibilities are likely to be rushed, deprioritized, or omitted entirely during periods of operational pressure.

Table 2. Strategic Recommendations for Strengthening Nurse-Led Transitional Care Safety and Continuity Systems

Recommendation Domain	Strategic Goal	Operational Action Items	Institutional Impact
Administrative & Policy Recognition	Formally establish transition nursing as a core safety strategy.	Formally recognize nurse-led transition management and care continuity as distinct, funded patient safety functions within organizational policies; elevate them to core design principles (Clarke et al., 2024; Singh, 2026).	Secures long-term financial sustainability, protects coordinating roles from routine bedside pressures, and reduces fragmentation (Pappas, 2008).
Clinical Role Institutionalization	Create defined coordination pathways for high-risk cohorts.	Establish defined nurse-led roles for case management, transition support, and post-discharge follow-up dedicated strictly to frail, elderly, chronic, and multimorbid cohorts (Marguet & Ogaz, 2019; Singh et al., 2026).	Ensures clear clinical responsibility for linking hospital care, outpatient specialty clinics, and home-based self-management.
Workforce Education & Training	Equip the nursing workforce with advanced coordination skills.	Integrate advanced transition safety frameworks, structured bedside handover methodologies, discharge counselling, and cross-sector communication into curricula (Blackman et al., 2014; Coleman et al., 2007).	Treats continuity work as a specialized, accountable part of professional nursing practice rather than an informal extension of care (Kalisch et al., 2009; Kitson et al., 2013).

Recommendation Domain	Strategic Goal	Operational Action Items	Institutional Impact
System Architecture Redesign	Build interprofessional systems that support care coordination.	Redesign interprofessional workflows to include shared digital care plans, structured cross-sector handover processes, referral pathways, and direct channels (Amorim-Lopes & Drach-Zahavy, 2019; Zimmermann et al., 2023).	Aligns system architecture with professional commitment, ensuring clinical data flows smoothly across shifts, specialists, and sectors (Jones et al., 2015).
Evaluation Framework Transformation	Align institutional metrics with person-centred success indicators.	Implement comprehensive evaluation frameworks that audit missed care indicators regularly, tracking patient satisfaction, quality of life, and communication alongside utilization (Kalisch & Williams, 2009; Lake et al., 2016).	Shifts institutional focus toward metrics that matter to patients themselves, validating the clinical value of holistic care models (Feo et al., 2017).

COMPREHENSIVE NARRATIVE ELABORATION ON GLOBAL TRANSITIONS

11.1 The Macro-Level Challenge of Health Trajectories

The challenges surrounding transition management must be understood within the context of global health system evolution (Suhonen & Scott, 2018). As medical advancements extend life expectancy, the global burden of chronic, complex disease has risen significantly, making multi-provider care the standard reality for aging populations worldwide (Singh et al., 2026). These individuals do not experience their recovery journeys as separate, isolated specialist categories or independent hospital shifts; rather, they experience them as a single, ongoing, and deeply complex life situation that demands coherent guidance and sustained relational support (Jones et al., 2015).

Consequently, the contemporary patient journey is long and continuous, requiring seamless integration among diverse acute, secondary, and primary care environments (Coleman et al., 2007; McNair et al., 2016). The traditional organizational boundaries that separate acute hospitals from community services act as arbitrary barriers to healing when applied to complex patient pathways (Singh, 2026).

11.2 The Shifting Burden of Care

When a healthcare system lacks structured nurse-led coordination models, the heavy burden of connecting these fragmented pathways shifts directly onto the shoulders of the patients and their family caregivers (Jones et al., 2015; Singh et al., 2026). This shift often produces unsafe, inequitable, and detrimental consequences (Kalisch et al., 2009). A frail patient moving across multiple units and managing complex medication changes without active guidance is placed at high risk for tracking errors, rapid functional deconditioning, and overwhelming recovery anxiety (Ausserhofer et al., 2014; Soohyun et al., 2022). Without access to a centralized coordinator to actively bridge the gaps between acute hospital discharges and community-based self-management support, these individuals routinely slide through the cracks, resulting in repeated consultations, duplicated diagnostic tests, conflicting treatment advice, and high-cost avoidable hospitalizations (Callen et al., 2004; Pappas, 2008; Zimmermann et al., 2023). This cycle highlights that care fragmentation is a major health-system failure that strains institutional capacities, drains public resources, and undermines the economic viability of public and private health systems globally (Recio-Saucedo et al., 2018).

11.3 The Transformative Power of Nursing Advocacy

By formally adopting and embedding integrated, nurse-led continuity models like the NLTSF, healthcare organizations can effectively dismantle these professional and structural silos (Clarke et al., 2024; Singh, 2026). Empowering niches to serve as continuity leaders ensures that a single, individualized, and coordinated care plan guides the patient across all settings (Marguet & Ogaz, 2019).

Nurses act as the essential connective tissue within the system architecture, coordinating with shift teams, collaborating with primary care providers, managing interprofessional data synchronization, and directly supporting the patient's daily self-management capabilities at home (Feo et al., 2017; Kitson et al., 2013). This comprehensive approach protects complex patients from dangerous care omissions, simplifies their treatment journeys, reduces the administrative burden on families, and builds a resilient, highly responsive, and human-centred healthcare system capable of handling care complexity on a global scale (Peter et al., 2022).

CONCLUSION

Modern healthcare systems are increasingly challenged by the growing complexity of multimorbidity, aging populations, and fragmented service delivery structures. As patients move repeatedly between acute hospitals, specialty clinics, rehabilitation services, and community-based environments, the risk of missed nursing care and breakdowns in continuity substantially increases. These invisible care gaps contribute directly to medication errors, preventable complications, treatment burden, psychological distress, avoidable readmissions, and diminished patient quality of life. The evidence reviewed throughout this paper clearly demonstrates that transitional vulnerabilities are not isolated failures of individual practitioners but are deeply rooted in structural, organizational, and systemic deficiencies embedded within contemporary healthcare systems.

The analysis further establishes that nurses occupy a uniquely critical position within the healthcare continuum due to their continuous patient contact, holistic assessment capabilities, educational role, and coordination responsibilities. Unlike episodic specialist interactions, nursing practice naturally spans clinical, relational, and organizational dimensions of care, making nurses ideally positioned to function as continuity leaders across transitions. However, healthcare systems have historically under-recognized and under-supported this continuity function, often limiting nursing roles to task-oriented bedside responsibilities rather than fully integrating nurses into formal transition management structures.

To address these systemic challenges, the proposed Nurse-Led Transition Safety Framework (NLTSF) offers a comprehensive and structured approach to minimizing fragmentation and eliminating missed care during patient transitions. By integrating early risk screening, standardized bedside handovers, proactive discharge planning, patient-centred educational verification, and structured post-discharge surveillance, the framework establishes continuity as a deliberate and protected clinical process rather than an assumed outcome of routine care delivery. The NLTSF not only strengthens patient safety and communication quality but also enhances medication adherence, supports self-management, reduces unnecessary healthcare utilization, and improves overall patient experiences across the care continuum.

Successful implementation of nurse-led continuity systems will require broad institutional commitment, including administrative recognition of transition nursing roles, workforce development, interdisciplinary collaboration, integrated communication infrastructures, and policy reforms that prioritize person-centred continuity outcomes alongside traditional utilization metrics. As healthcare systems continue to evolve in response to rising chronic disease burdens and increasing care complexity, nurse-led transitional care models must become a foundational design principle of modern healthcare delivery.

Ultimately, strengthening nurse-led continuity of care is not simply an operational improvement but a strategic healthcare necessity. By empowering nurses to lead integrated transitional care pathways, healthcare organizations can significantly reduce invisible care gaps, improve system responsiveness, protect vulnerable populations, and create safer, more coordinated, and more sustainable healthcare systems for the future.

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