Health care reform, like health care itself, is a complex process that requires a variety of professionals who are willing and able to make decisions that impact human life.

The current health reform legislation, the Affordable Care Act, includes a collection of initiatives focused on redesigning the delivery, cost and organization of health care. Expected to provide insurance coverage for the 32 million uninsured Americans, this act represents one of the biggest changes since the introduction of Medicare and Medicaid in 1965.

In October 2010, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the Institute of Medicine released their report titled "The Future of Nursing: Leading Change, Advancing Health." In this report, components of the Affordable Care Act are aligned with the current state of nursing, and suggestions for future nursing needs are identified. The 701-page report offers insight to the challenges and rewards of health care reform. It focuses on various components in the reform act, including coordinated and transitional care models along with an increased need for primary care services.

Coordinated care is a broad term that asks health professionals to manage the care between various services.

For example, a person with a chronic condition like heart failure may experience a cycle of care that starts at the doctor's office, moves to the emergency department and turns into an admission to the hospital. From the hospital, there might be a need to go to an inpatient rehabilitation unit for strengthening before returning home with home health services such as oxygen therapy. This process includes medications and treatments that need to follow the patient from place to place. In a relatively short time, it can become very confusing and complicated for the patient and their loved ones.

In a coordinated care, or patient-centered care model as they are frequently called, a nurse would be assigned to this patient and coordinate the care among the various providers, conduct home visits, teach self-management skills and collaborate with other medical professionals to provide quality care through the course of the disease, intervening early if problems do arise, possibly reducing the number of times the patient needs to return to the hospital.

Transitional care takes coordinated care to another level. Studies have shown that patients are most vulnerable when they transition from one level of care to another (hospital to home or hospital to nursing home, for example), because important information is not handed off or remembered by the patient or receiving team. A transitional care model uses specially trained nurses to not only coordinate but also provide care during and after the hospital stay, including any transitional care that may be needed before going home. As with patient-centered care, these nurses continue to work with the patients after they go home or to a nursing home, to promote self-care, do assessments and coordinate any needed follow-up care.

Coordinated care and transitional care models have been shown to be very effective both in quality of care and affordability, especially in the management of long-term or chronic diseases.
In 2006, Massachusetts implemented statewide health care reform and experienced a substantial increase in the need for primary care providers, including doctors, physician assistants, advanced practice nurses and registered nurses. In the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and Institute of Medicine study, they report that the National Association for Community Health Centers estimates the number of patients requiring primary health care services will increase from 16 million to 30 million per year.

Using information learned from Massachusetts, an additional 16,000 to 20,000 registered nurses (includes nurse practitioners and certified nurse midwives) will be needed to staff primary health centers. Not to mention that primary health centers are only one form of primary care, the need for nurses does not address the staff that will be needed for occupational health wellness programs, home care, or community health teams.

"The Future of Nursing: Leading Change, Advancing Health," suggests that health care reform focused on primary, patient-centered care promoting wellness and quality provides the perfect platform for nurses to take the lead in implementation. The report goes on to offer recommendations to prepare nursing for the task. It serves to remind us that at the center of all the debate and activity are people who require care. Provision of quality care across the continuum of life is a common goal of the 3 million nurses in the United States. For more information, view the full report at www.rwjf.org.

*Leann Ogilvie is a registered nurse and director of the Learning Center at St. Patrick Hospital.*