



COLLEGE & ASSOCIATION  
OF REGISTERED NURSES  
OF ALBERTA

# Scope of Practice for Registered Nurses

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# SCOPE OF PRACTICE FOR REGISTERED NURSES

## INTRODUCTION

The College and Association of Registered Nurses of Alberta (CARNA) is the legislated regulatory and professional body in which all registered nurses in the province are members, and therefore has the responsibility to:

- set and maintain professional standards of practice
- communicate those standards to the public and other stakeholders within the health care system
- appraise the competence, continuing competence and professionalism of its members through registration, disciplinary processes and the continuing competence program

Inherent in these primary roles is CARNA's responsibility for articulating the scope of practice for registered nurses for the understanding of the public, individual clients<sup>1</sup>, registered nurses and other health care providers and employers. This position statement builds on the Nursing Practice Standards, which apply to overall care and to all regulated members of CARNA in clinical practice, research, education and administration, and also links with the following CARNA documents: *Health Professions Act: Standards for Registered Nurses in the Performance of Restricted Activities* (2005), *Standards for Supervision of Nursing Students and Undergraduate Nursing Employees Providing Client Care* (2005), *Alternative and/or Complementary Therapy in Nursing Practice: Standards for Registered Nurses* (2005) and *Entry to Practice Competencies* (2005).

This position statement describes the knowledge of registered nurses and the comprehensive application of that knowledge to assist clients in meeting their health needs in whatever setting, complexity and situation they occur throughout the life span.

## LEGISLATION

With the passing of the *Health Professions Act* (HPA) (2000) and pursuant regulations, 28 colleges will govern 30 health care professions (as of September 2005) in Alberta. Previously existing legislated exclusive scopes of practice for health professions are replaced with practice statements that allow for overlapping scopes of practice between health professions. Only those acts determined to pose significant risk to the public and legislated as 'restricted activities' are 'exclusive' in the sense that only those professions who are authorized to perform each restricted activity may legally do so, based on individual practitioner competence *Government Organization Act* (2000) (Schedule 7.1, Section 2(1)).

Schedule 24, Section 3 of the HPA legislates the following practice statement for the profession of registered nurses:

- 3 In their practice, registered nurses do one or more of the following:
  - (a) based on an ethic of caring and the goals and circumstances of those receiving nursing services, registered nurses apply nursing knowledge, skill and judgment to

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<sup>1</sup> The term 'client' can refer to patients, residents, families, groups, communities and populations.

- (i) assist individuals, families, groups and communities to achieve their optimal physical, emotional, mental and spiritual health and well-being,
  - (ii) assess, diagnose and provide treatment and interventions and make referrals,
  - (iii) prevent or treat injury and illness,
  - (iv) teach, counsel and advocate to enhance health and well-being,
  - (v) coordinate, supervise, monitor and evaluate the provision of health services,
  - (vi) teach nursing theory and practice,
  - (vii) manage, administer and allocate resources related to health services, and
  - (viii) engage in research related to health and the practice of nursing,
- and
- (b) provide restricted activities authorized by the regulations.

This broad legislated practice statement encompasses all the activities in which registered nurses engage, although each individual registered nurse provides services based on the needs of the clients in a specific setting and within the scope of that individual nurse's knowledge, skills and judgment. This position statement further defines specific roles and responsibilities of registered nurses. Registered nursing activities are performed through the continuous, ongoing application of the nursing process: assessment, diagnosis and planning, implementation and evaluation.

## **FOUNDATIONS OF REGISTERED NURSING PRACTICE**

Registered nurses view people as unique, complex beings who must be perceived in their entirety to understand and effectively promote their health according to their individual life circumstances, health needs and goals. Clients of nursing care may be individuals, families, groups, communities or populations. Clients' life experiences and health are interconnected, interdependent and continuous, and cannot be separated into isolated episodes. People have the capacity for self-direction, learning, making choices, coping, adapting and changing.

Registered nurses address the client's ongoing health situation within the context of the person's wholeness, including biophysical, psychological, emotional, social, cultural and spiritual dimensions. In partnership with the client, the registered nurse identifies, relates, interprets and integrates the client's various needs with the input and contributions made by others concerned with the client's care. Registered nursing practice is individualized, focused on identifying the client's unique needs and facilitating the achievement of specific health goals with the client.

Registered nurses define health as the extent to which an individual or group is able to realize aspirations, to satisfy needs and to change or cope with the environment in which they live. Health is a resource for everyday life, not the objective of living. Health is a positive concept emphasizing social and personal resources and physical capacities and not only the absence of illness or disease (World Health Organization, 1984).

Registered nurses recognize the broad determinants of health as encompassing income and social status, social support networks, education, employment and working

conditions, physical environments, biology and genetic endowment, personal health knowledge, health practices and coping skills and the health care system.

Regardless of practice setting, registered nurses' practice is guided by the primary health care model. Primary health care is essential health care made accessible at a cost a country and community can afford, with methods that are practical, scientifically sound and socially acceptable (World Health Organization, 1978). Essential activities under the primary health care model are:

- a focus on health promotion and illness/injury prevention without sacrificing excellence in treatment and rehabilitation
- provision of services based on the needs of a defined population
- appropriate use of technology
- integration of health services to avoid duplication and increase continuity and accessibility for the client
- intersectoral collaboration
- public participation in design of services and allocation of resources
- establishment of inter-disciplinary teams of health care providers based on the needs of the individual, family or community
- equitable access to health through the most appropriate health care provider in the most appropriate setting

Registered nursing services are a key component in all sectors of the health care system. Because of their holistic view of people and health, registered nurses are ideally prepared and positioned to play a significant role in transforming the health system. Utilizing the full breadth and depth of their knowledge combined with the pragmatic understanding gained through their contacts with people in homes, schools, workplaces, institutional and other community settings, registered nurses contribute to improved health and sustainable health care for all citizens.

The focus and core of all registered nursing practice is the provision of direct care to clients. Four major domains are identifiable within the profession of registered nursing: **clinical practice, administration, education and research** (CARNA, 2003). The clinical practice role is fundamental to nursing. Registered nurse administrators, educators and researchers contribute to the provision of direct client care by maintaining, supporting and enabling direct care providers; developing and communicating knowledge and policy; and ensuring that the necessary resources are in place for safe, competent and ethical care.

### **Clinical Practice**

The unique contribution of registered nurses to the provision of health care involves the following key roles, which are effectively integrated in practice to achieve nursing goals:

- direct care provider
- critical thinker, assessor and interpreter
- coordinator of care, planner and evaluator
- participant, developer and/or leader in quality improvement activities
- decision-maker and problem solver
- case manager
- client advocate

- health policy advocate
- nursing leader

Registered nurses are knowledge workers. The breadth and depth of knowledge required by a registered nurse is gained through intensive and comprehensive entry-level education, nursing experience, commitment to continual learning and advanced education. The most appropriate entry-level preparation for a registered nurse beginning to practice in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is a baccalaureate nursing degree. Through a combination of experience, continuing education and advanced education, registered nurses develop progressive expertise in caring for defined client populations. All registered nurses practice within an ethical context, according to professional *Nursing Practice Standards* (CARNA, 2003) and adhering to the professional Canadian Nurses Association *Code of Ethics for Registered Nurses* (CNA, 2002b).

In a changing health care system over the past decade, the acuity level of clients in both institutional and community settings has increased markedly. Registered nurses are the most appropriate providers of direct nursing care for clients with complex, unstable or rapidly changing health status or situations.

The breadth and depth of the scope of knowledge of registered nurses enables comprehensive assessment of client needs, work settings, available resources and many other factors in complex and often rapidly changing situations. Critical thinking and accurate interpretation of complex information from a variety of sources including: client data, environmental factors, diagnostic test results, the assessments of other professionals and nursing assessment indicators are essential to the clinical decision-making required for safe and effective client care. Monitoring of client progress and evaluation of care involve astute observation and critical thinking, decisive action, and resourceful problem solving regardless of the setting in which the care is provided. The abilities of the registered nurse to demonstrate evidence-based practice and to participate in/conduct research, promote quality client care by ensuring that nursing interventions are supported by scientific rationale.

As coordinators of nursing care, registered nurses possess the knowledge, skills and judgment to prudently assign client care to other regulated or non-regulated care providers. This allows them to fully utilize all personnel and implement the primary health care principle of providing the most appropriate level of care by the most appropriate provider. Registered nurses are uniquely prepared to be case managers because they assess clients' needs in context as whole persons including their life situations as members of families and communities, creatively plan and provide the most appropriate care in partnership with clients and their families, and supervise and evaluate the care provided based on client health outcomes. As case managers, registered nurses judiciously apply their broad understanding of available resources to meet client needs appropriately while optimizing efficiency and effectiveness in the health care system.

In the client advocacy role, registered nurses support and empower clients to obtain the necessary information, care and resources to meet their health needs, and act on clients' behalf to achieve these ends when clients are unable to do so, individually or collectively. Registered nurses also advocate for healthy public policy by being politically active at the local, regional, provincial, national and global levels to contribute to the improvement of health of populations.

Registered nurses possess the knowledge, skills, judgment, influence, creativity and public esteem to lead the development of healthy public policy and the implementation of primary health care models. Their strengths in communication and collaboration allow

them to interact effectively with other health care professionals and with political leaders to persuade and convince key figures of the benefits of positively affecting the broad determinants of health.

Registered nurses are professional caregivers. Values fundamental to professional nursing practice are defined in the *Code of Ethics for Registered Nurses* (CNA, 2002a) and form the basis for ethical nursing practice. These values include: safe, competent and ethical care; health and well-being; choice; dignity; confidentiality; justice; accountability and quality practice environments. Registered nurses incorporate these values into their practice through compassionate involvement with clients, maintaining and fulfilling commitments and maintaining personal integrity and professional behaviour.

Caring is inherent and central to nursing practice. Registered nurses provide care for people in the midst of health, pain, loss, fear, disfigurement, dying, grieving, challenge, growth, birth, aging and transition. Nurses call this “the privileged place of nursing” (Benner & Wrubel, 1989). Registered nurses are with clients at their least inhibited and most intimate and vulnerable times to lend them strength and support. Registered nurses establish caring therapeutic relationships with clients and their families for the purposes of giving comfort, assisting with healing and providing a trusted source of health teaching. Using their broad knowledge base, innovative abilities and facilitative skills, registered nurses work in partnership with clients, families and other health care professionals to plan care according to individual needs and goals.

### **Administration**

The registered nurse administrator has a primary responsibility to manage health care delivery services and to also represent nursing services. Nursing administration occurs in many diverse settings. These include small facilities, integrated delivery systems, larger corporate facilities and academic settings, as well as ambulatory and non-traditional environments. In any of these settings, the nurse administrator has a responsibility to create a work environment that empowers registered nurses at all levels to utilize critical thinking and participate in decision-making that affects nursing practice. Such an environment requires openness to partnerships and interdisciplinary collaboration as well as organizational structures and processes that facilitate both vertical and horizontal communication (ANA, 2004).

In creating a quality practice environment, the registered nurse administrator focuses on implementing and supporting appropriate care delivery processes and workload management practices. In addition, the nurse administrator ensures that organizational supports such as access to appropriate technologies, education and research are in place along with communication systems that foster positive working relationships and interdisciplinary practice. Finally, the nurse administrator supports nursing leadership by ensuring autonomy and accountability for nursing practice in the practice environment and nurse participation in decision-making at all levels of the organization.

### **Education**

The nurse educator role evolves in academic settings and in clinical practice settings. The registered nurse in an educator role within an academic setting ensures the development and implementation of a broad-based educational preparation for students that includes a breadth of knowledge and skills from nursing and related disciplines to meet the complex health needs of clients in constantly evolving practice environments. Preparation at the baccalaureate level provides the foundation necessary for effective interdisciplinary practice and for the ethical, accountable and competent professional nursing practice

required to enter the profession. Provision of baccalaureate level education prepares registered nurses to work with individuals, families, groups, communities and populations in diverse settings (CNA, 2004a). Provision of advanced nursing education at the masters, doctoral and post-doctoral levels prepares registered nurses to conduct research, build nursing theory and disseminate study findings thereby advancing nursing, nursing knowledge and evidence-based practice (CNA & CASN, 2003).

The registered nurse in an educator role within a clinical practice setting recognizes that continuing competence through life-long learning is essential to professional nursing practice because it contributes to the quality of patient outcomes and to the evidence base for nursing practice (CNA, 2004b). The registered nurse in a clinical educator role promotes and facilitates a culture of life-long learning in the pursuit of excellence in professional nursing practice through the development and implementation of a variety of learning opportunities such as orientation programs, preceptorship and mentoring programs and continuing education opportunities in the work environment.

## **Research**

The registered nurse in a researcher role validates and refines existing knowledge and generates new knowledge that influences all domains of nursing. The knowledge generated through nursing research is used to support and guide nursing practice as well as improve nursing care, client outcomes and the health care system.

The nurse researcher benefits from a quality practice environment that fosters collaborative relationships which enhances the researcher's ability to conduct research and an agency's capacity to use research findings and improve client outcomes. Collaboration can be achieved through affiliation agreements, joint-appointments, research institutes, funding assistance and appointing nurse researchers to relevant organizational committees (RNABC, 2003).

The identification and consideration of knowledge gaps, in conjunction with practitioners, is a means by which the nurse researcher establishes research priorities. The nurse researcher has advanced knowledge and skill to generate high quality evidence through research activities. The nurse researcher also engages in knowledge transfer, translation and exchange to communicate relevant findings of the results of research to those who require this information. Finally, the nurse researcher also engages in ongoing research to explore the concepts of evidence, evidence dissemination and utilization in nursing practice (CNA, 2002).

The registered nurse in clinical practice contributes to nursing research by integrating best evidence in clinical practice, identifying knowledge gaps in collaboration with the nurse researcher and engaging in the research process.

## **CONCLUSION**

The goal of registered nurses is to assist people to attain and maintain optimal health, wellness and independence within each client's ability to do so. When clients are unable to be independent due to their personal health situations, nursing provides the appropriate care to meet their needs and optimize their quality of life.

Registered nurses address the health needs of people throughout the life span. These clients may be individuals, families, groups, communities and populations in any and all of the various environments and settings in which they live and work. These practice

locations include, but are not limited to: outpost nursing in remote areas, palliative care nursing, home care nursing, continuing care nursing, street nursing of disadvantaged inner city populations, mental health nursing, operating room nursing, nursing as a member of a primary care team in an after hours clinic, nurse practitioner practice in an adolescent health clinic, triage/provision of health information/way-finding through a telephone nursing service, nursing support for air ambulance emergency transport, cardiac transplant care, pediatric intensive care, acute medical/surgical care, critical care nursing, obstetrical delivery/post partum care, occupational health nursing in industrial settings and immunization and well baby home visiting in public health nursing.

The scope of practice of registered nurses is determined by the needs and health goals of their clients and is limited only by the specific competencies of the individual registered nurse to perform the activities necessary for the client population with whom that nurse works, within applicable legislation and agency policy. Registered nurses are uniquely prepared and positioned to provide leadership and serve as change agents in facilitating and strengthening health services.

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