



College of Registered Nurses
of Nova Scotia

Position Statement

Core Competencies for Registered Nurses and Nurse Practitioners in an Emergency/Disaster

Definitions

An **emergency** is a sudden and usually unforeseen event that calls for immediate measures to minimize its adverse consequences.

A **disaster** is an event that is relatively sudden, highly disruptive, time limited (although the effects may be long lasting), and public. A disaster is usually of greater magnitude than an emergency; disrupting essential services such as housing, transportation, communications, sanitation, water and health care, and requiring the response of people outside the affected community.

INTRODUCTION

As the regulatory authority for registered nurses in Nova Scotia, the College of Registered Nurses of Nova Scotia (the College: CRNNS) has developed an emergency preparedness plan (EPP) to ensure the continuity and effectiveness of its organizational processes in the event of a disaster or emergency. This plan, which can be accessed at www.crnns.ca, is intended to serve as a guide/framework for the College to deal with emergency or disaster situations such as natural events, accidents, medical emergencies, and/or acts of terrorism.

There are two components of the College's EPP: a business contingency plan (BCP) and an emergency response plan (ERP). The BCP is intended to minimize the effect of unscheduled interruptions on the operations of the College and to ensure the continuation of vital business functions. The ERP describes the logistics of mobilizing and supporting the registered nursing workforce in Nova Scotia in the event of a disaster or emergency.

In today's global environment it is becoming increasingly important that registered nurses have, at least, a basic level of knowledge and understanding related to the management of emergency and/or disaster situations (e.g., natural, man-made, technological). It is also essential that registered nurses understand their own roles and responsibilities in these situations, as well as those of other key stakeholders. The College's EPP provides a brief overview of these roles and responsibilities.

Key Concepts

Registered nurses represent a significant resource in the implementation of any national or provincial emergency preparedness plan. With the global threats of terrorism and the possibility of a worldwide flu pandemic, many countries, including Canada, are comprehensively assessing their preparedness and resources to respond to critical disaster or emergency situations.

The College has established competencies that entry-level registered nurses and nurse practitioners in Nova Scotia are expected to demonstrate upon graduation from an approved nursing education program in order to provide the public with safe, effective and ethical nursing care.

Based on their practice experiences, registered nurses build on these entry-level competencies and develop new competencies and expertise in varied settings. Nurse practitioners (NPs) are registered nurses with additional educational preparation and experience who possess and demonstrate the competencies to autonomously diagnose, order and interpret diagnostic tests, prescribe pharmaceuticals and perform specific procedures within their

legislative scope of practice. NPs provide essential health services, including the management of acute and chronic disease, within a holistic model of care, in collaboration with clients, physicians and other healthcare professionals (CNA, 2005).

The entry-level competencies established by the College, for both registered nurses and nurse practitioners, reflect the knowledge, skills and judgment required to provide the public with safe, effective and ethical nursing care, regardless of client populations or practice environments. In addition to these core or basic competencies, every registered nurse and nurse practitioner should have the knowledge and understanding to recognize the potential for emergency/disaster situations; know how to protect themselves; know how to provide immediate care for involved individuals; recognize their own roles and limitations; and know how to seek additional information and resources (International Nursing Coalition for Mass Casualty Education, INCMCE, 2003): now known as Nursing Emergency Preparedness Education Coalition, NEPEC.

The NEPEC has developed competencies for all nurses in relation to emergency preparedness (Weiner, 2006). These competencies were considered by the College in the development of this position statement.

Registered nurses are accountable to be knowledgeable about workplace and professional resources for emergency and disaster situations. Recommended resources include the National Health Services Plan (Health Canada and the Public Health Agency of Canada [PHAC]); the Department of Health's (provincial) *Pandemic Influenza Plan*; the District Health Authority plans; municipal (community) plans, and the College's *Emergency Preparedness Plan*. Most plans are available on respective websites. For additional information, registered nurses could also contact their agency/facility human resource and nursing education departments, as well as the College.

Core Competencies for Emergency/ Disaster Events

The core competencies identified for registered nurses and nurse practitioners in emergency and disaster situations are broad and can be applied to nursing practice in different ways depending on specific settings, client populations, and/or position descriptions.

In addition to the entry-level competencies for registered nurses and nurse practitioners, core competencies specific to emergency and/or disaster situations include:

1. Recognize emergency/disaster situations and the potential for mass casualty events.
2. Describe the phases of emergency management (i.e., preparedness, response, recovery and evaluation).
3. Identify safe work environments and protect self and others from harm.
4. Participate in coordinated, interdisciplinary responses to emergency and/or disaster situations.
5. Follow organizational communication plans for emergencies/disasters.
6. Recognize own role and limitations in emergency preparedness, planning and response.
7. Apply principles relative to disaster and emergency planning and response (e.g. triage, quarantine, infection control measures, personal protective equipment, and emergency management systems).
8. Use information and resources needed to manage emergency/disaster events (e.g., the College ERP, employers' emergency plans, CNPS, and other relevant resources).
9. Identify ethical issues related to emergency/disaster events (e.g., duty to provide care/refusal of care, reporting to work, resource allocation, human rights issues, confidentiality, reporting requirements, personal vs. work commitments).
10. Applies an ethical decision-making framework to guide decisions.

11. Recognize community health issues related to emergency/disaster events (e.g. safety, food, shelter, contamination, exposure, maintenance of special-needs populations).
12. Understand the diversity of emotional, psychological and socio-cultural responses to emergency/disaster events in clients, healthcare providers and other stakeholders, and use appropriate resources (e.g., critical incident stress debriefing).
13. Employ appropriate communication and coping strategies to manage responses of self and others.

Stakeholder Roles

Comprehensive preparation for emergency and/or disaster situations requires a coordinated approach by individual nurses, employers, nursing regulatory bodies, accreditation bodies, educational institutions and governments.

a) Registered Nurses

Registered nurses are accountable to have a basic understanding and knowledge of the core competencies related to emergency preparation/management, including employers' emergency/disaster plans and other workplace and professional resources.

b) Employers

Employers are responsible for ensuring that they have a current and comprehensive emergency/disaster plan, and that employees are informed of their roles and accountabilities in the plan (e.g., education sessions, simulation exercises). Employers are also responsible to provide:

- adequate protective devices for employees
- fitness to work guidelines
- employee assistance, including stress management and counseling
- education and/or training for employees who are asked to work in unfamiliar areas, based on a facility's emergency preparedness plan.

c) Regulatory Nursing Organizations

In addition to developing core competencies specific to emergency and disaster situations, nursing regulators should maintain ongoing dialogue with government and other stakeholders to coordinate emergency preparedness planning.

In the event of an emergency or disaster, nursing regulatory bodies are responsible to provide ongoing practice advice and consultation to individual registered nurses, nurse practitioners and employers, and, as required, to expedite the temporary licensure of eligible registered nurses and nurse practitioners.

d) Accreditation Organizations

Accreditation organizations are responsible to develop and integrate performance indicators for emergency preparedness into accreditation requirements.

e) Educational Institutions

Educational institutions are accountable to include basic emergency preparedness competencies in curriculum content and to assist students to apply the content in emergency situations (e.g., assessment as it relates to triage).

f) Governments

Governments are accountable to develop, coordinate, implement and evaluate emergency preparedness plans, including the National Health Services Plan (Health Canada and PHAC); provincial Pandemic Influenza Plan; district health authorities' plans; and municipal (community) plans. It is also essential for governments to provide timely communication of their plans to other key stakeholders, to facilitate a seamless response.

Conclusion

Registered nurses and nurse practitioners graduate with basic, entry-level competencies and as such have an important role to play in facilitating the provision of safe, competent and ethical nursing care. In the event of an emergency or disaster, College staff will work with registered nurses, employers and other stakeholders, as appropriate, to help nurses in meeting the additional core competencies required in accordance with the College's *Emergency Preparedness Plan*; relying on the *Standards for Nursing Practice*, other policy statements and guidelines, and practice consultations.

References

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