NOVA SCOTIA COLLEGE OF NURSING

RESOLVING PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE ISSUES
PRACTICE GUIDELINE

The Nova Scotia College of Nursing (NSCN) is the regulatory body for licensed practical nurses (LPNs), registered nurses (RNs) and nurse practitioners (NPs) in Nova Scotia. Our mandate is to protect the public by promoting the provision of safe, competent, ethical and compassionate nursing services by our registrants. The term nurse in this document refers to LPNs, RNs, and NPs unless otherwise stated.

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Our practice support tools are developed using current reference material. The source of this material is available upon request.

Introduction

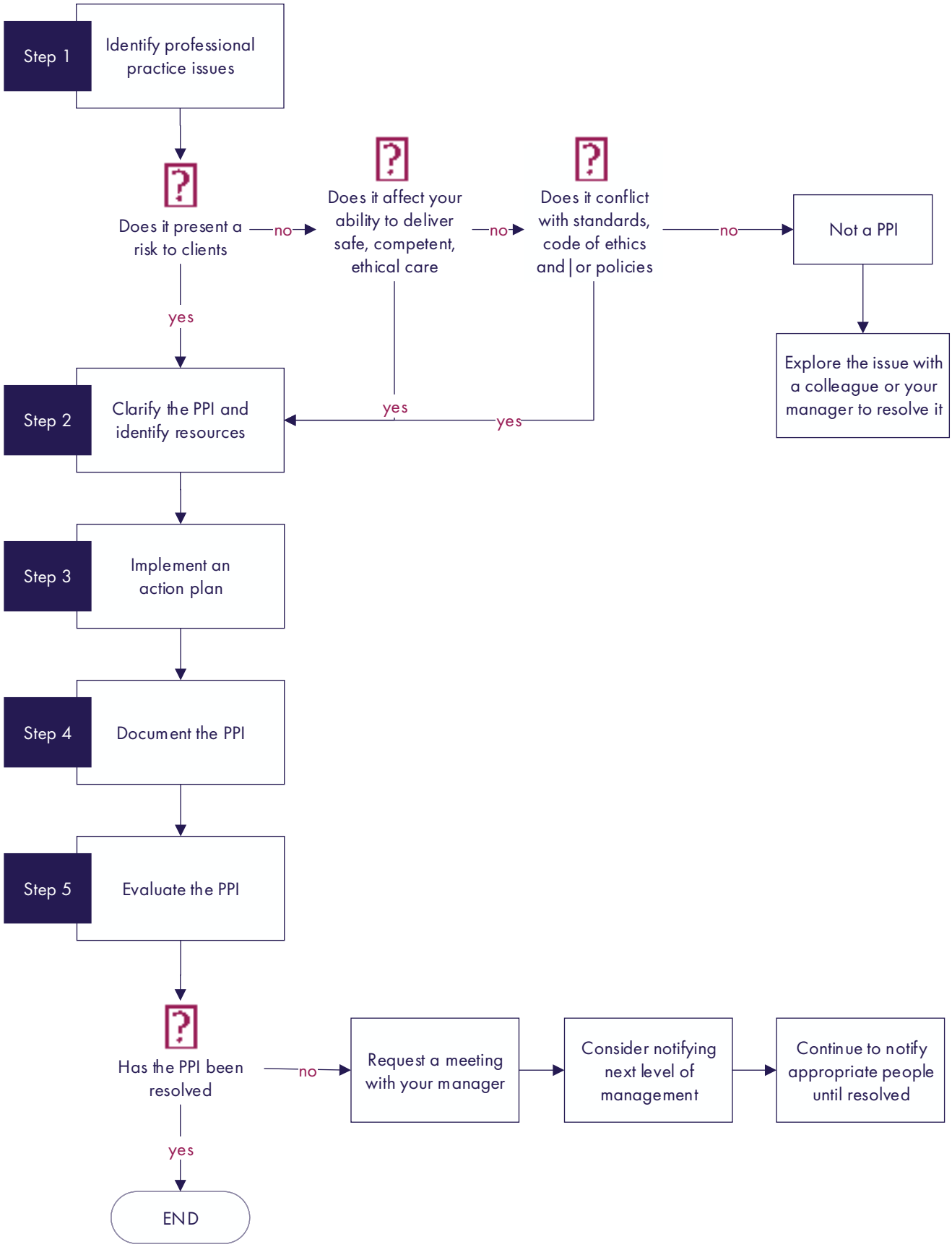
This guideline is a resource for nurses in all practice settings to help them understand how to:

- Identify, communicate and resolve professional practice issues (PPIs)
- Clarify the PPI and Identify Resources
- Implement an Action Plan
- Document a PPI
- Evaluate a PPI

Like all regulatory tools, use this document in conjunction with employer policy, applicable legislation and the standards of practice and code of ethics for LPNs, RNs and NPs.

Resolving Professional Practice Issues Framework

Answering the questions included in this framework will assist you in resolving the PPI. The five steps in the process are explained in more detail in this document



STEP 1: Identify Professional Practice Issues

WHAT IS A PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE ISSUE (PPI)?

A professional practice issue (PPI) is any situation, action or behavior which:

- compromises client care and/or service by placing a client at risk
- inhibits, disrupts or prevents the delivery of safe, competent, compassionate or ethical nursing services
- supports, encourages or perpetuates the delivery of nursing services which are not consistent with the standards of practice, code of ethics or employer policy

PPIs and employment issues can overlap or exist separately. The major difference is that PPIs always have an impact on the standards of practice and the safety of the client or others while, employment issues generally relate specifically to the employment relationship.

Difference between PPI and employment issue

PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE ISSUE	EMPLOYMENT ISSUE
Pattern of unsafe practices	Tardiness, Absenteeism
Confidentiality breaches	Staffing ratios
Falsification of information	Dress code violations
Inappropriate communication, bullying	Bullying
Nurse unable to practice safely due to medical, physical, mental or emotional health condition	Denial of time-off/vacation

Depending on the context, bullying could be a professional practice and/or employment issue.

NURSING RESPONSIBILITIES

As self-regulated health professionals, all nurses:

- Are accountable to meet their standards of practice and code of ethics
- Must recognize and attempt to resolve PPIs to minimize potential negative impacts on clients

It may be considered a violation of your standards of practice if you are aware of a PPI but do not take action.

QUESTIONS TO DETERMINE IF YOU HAVE A PPI

What makes the situation, action or behaviour a PPI? Does the issue…

- Place clients at risk?
- Affect your ability to deliver safe, competent, ethical and compassionate nursing care and service?
- Conflict with or prevent you from meeting your standards of practice, code of ethics, nursing legislation or organizational policies and procedures?

If you answered NO to all of these questions, the issue is likely not a PPI. However, you should continue to explore the situation with a trusted colleague or your manager to ensure the issue is resolved.

If you answered YES to any of these questions, you may have a PPI - go to **STEP 2**.

STEP 2: Clarify the PPI and Identify Resources

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

It's important to take a step back from a situation to gather information, identify resources (internal and external) and make an informed analysis of the situation. There may be situations where immediate action is required, such as when a client is in immediate risk.

The following questions will assist you in reflecting on and exploring a PPI in detail:

- Is this a new or recurring PPI?
- If the PPI continues, what is the likelihood that client safety is impacted?
- Does the PPI affect all clients or individual clients?
- Who else may be affected by the PPI and what are their perspectives?
- Do you have the knowledge and skill to address the PPI?
- What are the contributing factors to consider as you reflect on the PPI?

COMMON CONTRIBUTING FACTORS TO THE PPI

The following is a list of factors that may contribute to a PPI (this may not be a complete list):

Accountability (e.g. not accepting accountability for client outcomes)
Organizational policies/procedures/processes (e.g. none available to provide direction in specific situation)
Communication (e.g. inappropriate, no communication)
Physical resources (e.g. not having appropriate supplies to meet care needs)
Competency (e.g. not having applicable competencies to care for client(s))
Responsibility (e.g. not accepting responsibility for actions or inactions)
Ethical/Legal (e.g. moral distress related to the issue; what's happening is illegal)
Standards (e.g not being able to meet minimum standards of practice)
Human Resources (e.g. not having enough staff)

Developing a Description of the PPI

Once you have explored the PPI fully; develop a detailed description of the issue and include:

- Date, time, place and people involved
- How the issue affects the client, your nursing practice and/or the team
- Contributing factor(s)

This description will be helpful when communicating the issue with your manager and others.

POTENTIAL RESOURCES

Resources that can be used to assist in resolving your PPI can be internal or external to the organization and include but not limited to:

- **Internal**: colleagues, managers, clinical educators, a mentor, Human Resources, Occupational Health and Wellness, professional practice leaders
- **External**: NSCN Practice Consultants, unions, Canadian Nurses Protective Society, Employee Assistance program, education programs, Human Rights Commission
- **Resource documents**: standards of practice, Nursing Act, code of ethics, NSCN practice documents, organizational policies, procedures and processes

The resources you use will depend on the PPI you are addressing, what is available to you and personal choice.

STEP 3: Implement an Action Plan

DEVELOP A PLAN

Once aware of a PPI, you must develop a plan to address the issue in order to meet your obligation to maintain client and public safety. The plan will vary depending upon the urgency, nature and complexity of the PPI.

When forming a plan of action, the following steps can be applied, either individually or with your team:

- Brainstorm possible options for resolving the PPI
- Determine potential positive and negative outcomes for the options identified
- Decide which option(s) may be the best approach
- Develop a plan outlining the actions you will take and when to implement the chosen option(s)

THREE MOST COMMON OPTIONS

There are three common options when addressing a PPI:

1. Discuss the PPI with the individual involved

If a concern is identified with a colleague's practice or behaviour, try to discuss and resolve it with the individual. When appropriate, this is always the best option. For example, it would be appropriate to have this discussion if you feel safe or if you will see the person is a reasonable time frame after the PPI is identified.

As part of the private discussion, focus on the impacts on safety and the standards of practice and offer support, mentorship, guidance and resources for the individual.

Consider informing your manager of your plan to address the PPI. They can support you and may be able to offer you additional resources.

If the PPI is unchanged after having the discussion, you should involve your manager.

2. Discuss with your manager

In some circumstances, it may be more appropriate to bring the issue directly to your manager or supervisor. While this can be worrisome and uncomfortable for some nurses, it is part of meeting your obligation to client safety.

When communicating with your manager about a PPI:

- Provide as much factual data as possible, including dates, timelines and objective information about the impact on client care, safe nursing practice and/or team relations.
- Frame conversations using the standards of practice and code of ethics. These documents focus the conversation on the nurse's professional responsibilities, keeping the conversation more objective.
- Bring possible solutions and identify what you could do to support a resolution of the PPI.
- Plan for next steps, such as arranging a follow-up meeting or confirming that the manager has taken accountability for next steps.

3. Report to NSCN, other regulatory body or an external authority

Depending on your employer policies and reporting process, you or your manager may be required to make a report. Refer to the NSCN Duty to Report Guidelines that provides further information about the legal and ethical responsibilities relating to reporting and documenting challenging situations in practice.

STEP 4: Document the PPI

WHAT TO INCLUDE FOR DOCUMENTATION

It's important to keep personal records of all steps taken to resolve a PPI. This is to ensure that there is an accurate account of events and that you are able to demonstrate that you have met your professional obligations.

Ensure privacy and confidentiality of client information.

It's recommended that all communication with managers and other leaders of your organization be noted in your personal records. Consider writing a letter or email to follow-up on the meeting and summarize the discussion. Refer to the Sample Letter Addressing a Professional Practice Issue at end of this document.

Keeping an accurate account of the situation is imperative for the integrity of the information. Be sure to include the following in any written communication:

- The PPI description
- When the issue occurred (specific date and time)
- Exactly what happened, written in an objective and factual manner
- How the issue has impacted the client(s) and your nursing practice
- Other relevant information including meetings and phone calls, who was in attendance and outcomes
- A request for the manager to follow up with you

WHERE TO DOCUMENT

Documentation is written or electronically generated information about a client that describes the care, including the observations, assessment, planning, intervention and evaluation or service provided to that client. The client's health record is not the place to document discussions regarding a PPI unless the PPI has had a direct impact on the client.

You may be required to document the PPI as a serious reportable event (SRE). Check your organizational policy to determine this.

Refer to the NSCN Documentation Guidelines for more information regarding the principles of documentation.

STEP 5: Evaluate the PPI

REFLECTION

This final step is to reflect on what happened, who was involved, what you learned and if you would do anything differently if another PPI is to occur. If the PPI was addressed with the support of others, it's important to include them in the evaluation process. Not all PPIs are resolved immediately and this may need to be noted in the evaluation process.

Review the process you used by asking yourself the following:

- Did I clearly identify the issue?
- Could I define how and when client care or service was affected?
- Were the right people involved in discussions and attempts to resolve the issue?
- Is there evidence that my manager, if involved, took steps to address the PPI?
- What could have been done differently?

HAS THE PPI BEEN RESOLVED?

If your manager is involved in managing the PPI, it's acceptable to ask them to inform you when it has been addressed. If you see the PPI re-occur in the future, it's important to notify your manager.

> Be aware that because of confidentiality, the manager may not be able to provide you with detailed information about how they have resolved the PPI. They may only be able to inform you that the issue has been addressed.

WHAT IF THE PPI PERSISTS?

If, after a reasonable time the PPI persists, you need to continue to act until it is addressed. This includes:

- Requesting a meeting with your manager
- If you have already met with your manager, requesting another meeting to determine when resolution is likely
- Considering discussing with the next level of leadership in your organization
- Continuing to notify the appropriate people until the issue has been resolved
- Contact a NSCN Practice Consultant for guidance.

Key Points

Nurses need to:

- Recognize and attempt to resolve PPIs
- Develop and implement a plan
- Keep personal records of steps taken to resolve a PPI
- Reflect on the PPI and evaluate

Suggested Readings

- NSCN Documentation Guidelines
- NSCN Duty to Report Guidelines

For further information on anything contained within this practice guideline, please contact a NSCN practice consultant at practice@nscn.ca.

Resolving Professional Practice Issues Worksheet

This worksheet can be used when working through your PPI; it **does not** contain all information within the guideline.

STEP 1	**Identify Professional Practice Issues** Does this issue… • Place clients at risk? • Impact your ability to deliver safe, competent, ethical, compassionate nursing care? • Conflict/prevent you meeting SOP, COE, Nursing Act or Org P&P? If yes to any question you may have a PPI	**Notes**:
STEP 2	**Clarify the PPI & Identify Resources** • Is this a new or recurring PPI? • Will it impact client safety if it continues? • Does it affect all clients or an individual? • Who else affected, other than clients? • Do you have the knowledge & skill to address? What are contributing factors? What are potential resources? Write out a detailed description	**Notes**:
STEP 3	**Implement an Action Plan** Develop a plan Identify options: • Discuss with individual involved • Discuss with employer • Report to NSCN etc	**Notes**:
STEP 4	**Document the PPI** • Keep personal records of steps taken • Follow up meetings with managers with a letter or email • Do not document on client chart unless direct impact on client • Check to see if should be documented as a Serious Reportable Event	**Notes**:
STEP 5	**Evaluate the PPI** • Reflection • Has the PPI been resolved? • What if the PPI persists?	**Notes**:

Sample Letter Addressing a Professional Practice Issue

Date

Manager Name Title

Employer Address

Dear X,

I am writing this letter in follow up to our discussion on <date> regarding the professional practice concern we discussed, the impact of the issue on my ability to meet the <Standards of Practice for RNs or LPNs/Code of Ethics/organizational policies> and potential solutions. My concern is <state concern>.

The incident occurred on <be specific, objective and factual, include exactly what happened, when it happened, and any other relevant information>.

The issue has impacted my ability to meet the <Standards of Practice for RNs or LPNs/Code of Ethics/ organizational policies> in the following ways <include relevant standards and indicators or other details as applicable>.

Based on our discussion when we met, I know you understand the seriousness of this situation and the potential impact on our ability to provide safe patient care. Possible resolutions we discussed were:

In closing I would like to thank you for taking the time to meet with me and discuss these concerns. As we discussed, I look forward to a response from you by <date>.

Sincerely Name, Designation, Unit, Hospital

Adapted from the College of Registered Nurses of British Columbia –
Getting Started: A Sample Letter to Address Professional Practice Problems, 2011