

Clarifying RN Scope of Practice

Margaret Milner MN RN\*

Brittany Allen BScN Student

Nicholas Howe BScN Student

Katelyn Toal BScN Student

MacEwan University

Edmonton, AB

\*Author correspondence

Margaret Milner

Bachelor of Science in Nursing Program, Faculty of Health & Community Sciences

MacEwan University

9-501B, 10700 - 104 Avenue

Edmonton, Alberta T5J 4S2

Tel: [\(780\) 633 3936](tel:(780)6333936) FAX: [\(780\) 497 5757](tel:(780)4975757)

Email: [milnerm0@macewan.ca](mailto:milnerm0@macewan.ca)

## Clarifying RN Scope of Practice

The Canadian Nurses Association (CNA), provincial and territorial professional associations, and various healthcare organizations call upon registered nurses (RNs) to work to their “full scope of practice”. As a class of fourth year registered nursing students taking a course on future directions in nursing practice, our professor challenged us to define the role of the registered nurse in Canada’s healthcare system.

Challenged by rising costs and the imposition of fiscal constraints on our healthcare system, we came to realize that registered nursing practice is in crisis as other groups of healthcare professionals position themselves as viable alternatives in the pursuit of health system sustainability (i.e. Licensed/Registered Practical Nurses, Physician Assistants). Despite ongoing efforts to raise awareness of the contributions RNs can make in transforming care delivery (i.e. CNA National Expert Commission, 2012), RN practice is being eroded as new models of care delivery are implemented in health authorities across the country. As future members of the registered nursing profession, we felt compelled to create a dialogue regarding this important issue.

As a final project for the course, we decided to conduct a *Teach In* whereby we would stimulate a discussion within the registered nursing community about what it means to work to full scope of practice. Our *Teach In* was envisioned as a strategy to stimulate dialogue through education and the sharing of ideas. We reflected on the assigned readings from our class to create a list of items that supported the notion of RNs working to full scope of practice (insert Figure 1 about here). In small groups, we visited various health care agencies in the greater Edmonton area to gather opinions from a variety of registered nurses. We spoke with registered nurses, registered nursing students, nurse practitioner students, and registered psychiatric nurses from a variety of settings including hospitals, universities, public health, and continuing care. Willing

participants were engaged in discussions about working to full scope of practice, meanwhile reflecting on our own list of items. Nurses were asked to complete a poster that included their response to the statement, “I believe working to full scope of practice as a registered nurse means...”. After obtaining written consent, a photo of the participant with their poster was taken. We then compiled these photos into a video that we later shared with participants uploaded on Youtube ([http://youtu.be/\\_qNyBs8UJFo](http://youtu.be/_qNyBs8UJFo)).

Our initial goal was to develop a greater sense of what it means to be a registered nurse working to full scope of practice from an emic perspective. RNs from various settings engaged in dialogue with us that emphasized the importance of a clearly defined role of the registered nurse. The reception to our inquiry ranged from passion to skepticism. Some participants contributed enthusiastically and provided new and interesting vantage points towards our cause. Contrary to this we also experienced some resistance from nurses. We found that many of the individuals we spoke with were hesitant and/or had difficulty articulating what it means to work to full scope of practice as a registered nurse. Some of the nurses questioned our motive and several refused to participate. Upon reflection, we realized that a fear of unknowing may be the reason for some of the reticence we experienced. Perhaps the lack of conceptual clarity surrounding the role of registered nurses surfaces a defensive stance among nurses as a collective. Nurses also expressed a fear of repercussion from their employer about the responses they gave and having their picture displayed publicly.

As we reflect on our experience, we realized that two perspectives are operating together when referring to defining full scope of practice; the legal and the professional. The legal perspective is outlined in legislation such as the Health Professions Act (HPA) in Alberta. The HPA provides a comprehensive list of restricted activities that legally define the limits of our

practice as Registered Nurses. Some nurses we interviewed made reference to knowledge, skills, and the use of evidence to support their practice within the legal context. By using the HPA to guide our practice we protect the public and ensure the safety of all people in our care.

A legal scope of practice can only be defined on paper, however the idea of *how* nurses embody the legal scope of practice is a much more peculiar thing. Shannon Spenceley, president of the College and Association of Registered Nurses of Alberta refers to the full scope of practice as making a commitment to use leadership in our daily practice. Her description encompasses much more than simply the legal framework. As fourth year nursing students, we are taught that it is up to individual nurses to find the leader within themselves and apply this with intention in the practice setting. It became clear to us that most participants in our *Teach In* viewed full scope of practice from the professional standpoint. Some examples from our video included becoming a leader, finding your voice, and being a mentor and a role model. We realized that the positive attitudes, passion, and commitment to relationship that registered nurses identified in our *Teach In* are within the professional scope that empowers nurses to foster human connections. We saw how the professional scope transcends the clearly defined legal framework - it became clear to us that this is the less visible part of nursing that we need to bring to the surface in our future practice as registered nurses.

As keen fourth year students getting ready to graduate, our ultimate goal in writing about our experience with our *Teach In* is to stimulate discussion to aid in clarifying our collective understanding of what it means to work to full scope of practice. From this project we discovered that the confusion we felt in defining the role of the registered nurse is rooted in the conflation between the legal and professional perspectives. In bringing awareness to this distinction, we feel empowered to realize the vision put forth by the CNA National Expert Commission to lead by

example and engage in health system transformation as we transition to the role of the registered nurse.