

Integrating Harm Reduction Approaches in Nursing

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All registrants¹ of the College of Registered Nurses of Alberta (CRNA)² have a responsibility to provide safe, competent, and ethical care. The dramatic increase in the number of opioid-related deaths has resulted in the expansion of harm reduction approaches to care. There is growing evidence that illustrates the benefits of harm reduction in supporting individuals living with, and families and communities impacted by, substance use. A harm reduction approach aligns with registrants' responsibilities to use critical inquiry and evidence-informed knowledge to protect and promote an individual's right to autonomy, respect, privacy, and dignity. As with all aspects of nursing practice, registrants are expected to use reasonable judgement and evidence-informed decisions that best support client outcomes.

Purpose

The CRNA recognizes that harm reduction principles and practices are integral to safe, competent, and ethical care. The purpose of this document is to outline registrants' responsibilities and accountabilities in integrating harm reduction approaches into nursing practice.

What is Harm Reduction?

The purpose of harm reduction is to reduce the consequences of actions that have increased risks of negative health outcomes. Within the context of substance use, harm reduction refers to policies, programs, and practices that reduce the adverse health, social and economic consequences of legal and illegal psychoactive drugs without necessarily reducing drug consumption (Canadian Nurses Association [CNA], 2017b).

¹ The term "registrants" includes registered nurses (RNs), graduate nurses, certified graduate nurses, nurse practitioners (NPs), graduate nurse practitioners, and RN or NP courtesy registrants on the CRNA registry.

² The College and Association of Registered Nurses of Alberta (CARNA) is operating as the College of Registered Nurses of Alberta (CRNA).

Principles of Harm Reduction and Substance Use

Key principles of harm reduction include

- commitment to public health and human rights;
- pragmatism – substance use is viewed as an enduring feature of human existence;
- humanistic values including dignity, compassion, and non-judgmental acceptance of people who use drugs;
- reducing risk and harms;
- using best available evidence of costs and benefits;
- focusing on immediate goals;
- acknowledging incremental change;
- challenging policies and practices that maximize harm;
- transparency; and
- meaningful participation of those who use substances in policy making and program development.

(CNA, 2017a)

Registrant Responsibility and Accountability

Registrants who support clients using a harm reduction approach are responsible and accountable for

- reviewing and reflecting on the following documents which provide a framework to direct and guide their nursing practice. Many of the competencies, standards, and principles outlined in these documents are consistent with the principles of harm reduction:
 - The *Entry-Level Competencies for the Practice of Registered Nurses* (CRNA, 2019) and *Entry Level Competencies for Nurse Practitioners in Canada* (CRNA, 2016) are the essential competencies that all RNs and NPs must possess to be proficient when they begin practice.
 - The *Code of Ethics for Registered Nurses* (CNA, 2017b) provides a statement of the ethical values of nurses' commitments to persons with health-care needs and persons receiving care. The principles of harm reduction are consistent with the concept of social justice and the values and responsibility statements in the *CNA Code of Ethics for Registered*

Nurses. A harm reduction approach aligns with registrants' responsibility to use critical inquiry and evidence-based knowledge to protect and promote clients' right to autonomy, respect, privacy, and dignity.

- The *Practice Standards for Regulated Members* (CRNA, 2013) assists registrants in decision-making and outlines the minimum practice expectations of the profession.
- recognizing the prevalence of stigmatization and discrimination related to substance use;
- identifying and reflecting on their own personal beliefs and values and taking steps to minimize the potential influence of these values and beliefs in order to provide unbiased care;
- seeking out and using evidence-informed best practices in harm reduction when caring for clients living with, and families and communities impacted by, substance use;
- identifying how the social determinants of health and trauma can impact substance use;
- being familiar with employer requirements and seeking out support in the practice setting to ensure safe, competent, and ethical care;
- protecting and promoting clients' right to autonomy, respect, and dignity;
- creating a safe environment and engaging in relational practice to build effective, trusting, and therapeutic relationships with clients and families; and
- engaging in continuous learning to build knowledge, competencies, and skills required to care for individuals and families using a harm reduction approach.

References

- Canadian Nurses Association. (2017a). *Code of ethics for registered nurses*. <https://www.cna-aiic.ca/en/nursing/regulated-nursing-in-canada/nursing-ethics>.
- Canadian Nurses Association. (2017b). *Harm reduction & illicit substance use: Implications for nursing* (rev. ed.). <https://ohrn.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Harm-Reduction-and-Illicit-Substance-Use-Implications-for-Nursing.pdf>.
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- College of Registered Nurses of Alberta. (2016). *Entry-level competencies for nurse practitioners in Canada*.
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