

# Professional Presence and Registered Nurses in Nova Scotia

## Practice Guideline

### Introduction

The College of Registered Nurses of Nova Scotia is legislated to serve and protect the public interest through the regulation of individual registered nurses (RN) and nurse practitioners (NP). The nursing profession is privileged to be a self-regulating profession and the College's governing presence allows the nursing profession to regulate itself. This means that registered nurses are able to lead, direct and make decisions about their own profession. Together, we work to ensure safe and quality nursing care in the interest of Nova Scotians.

One of the College's roles is to promote excellence in nursing and to ensure nursing standards are met by providing resources and education to RNs and NPs. The College believes that the public has a right to expect a professional presence from registered nurses and that there is a responsibility to portray that professional presence to clients, families and the general public. The standards also reinforce this, as the *Standards of Practice for Registered Nurses*<sup>1</sup> (2017) explain that every registered nurse is expected to demonstrate a professional presence with clients.

This document is designed to assist RNs and NPs in understanding their professional presence obligations and to offer guidance to meet this standard of practice. For the purpose of this document, the registered nurse title will encompass the nurse practitioner title, as nurse practitioners must adhere to the *Standards of Practice of Registered Nurses* that serve as the foundation for this document.

### What is Professional Presence?

Professional presence is the demonstration of compassion respect, confidence, integrity, optimism, passion, and empathy, in accordance with the guidelines *Standards of Practice for Registered Nurses* and the Canadian Nurses Association's *Code of Ethics for Registered Nurses* (2008). It includes a registered nurse's verbal and nonverbal communications and the ability to articulate a positive role and professional image, including the use of full name and title (CRNNS, 2017). The demonstration of professional presence leads to trusting relationships with clients, families, communities and other healthcare team members.

Professional presence requires that registered nurses, in all roles, demonstrate professional standards and ethical behaviors. RNs are expected to exhibit the values and attributes of professionalism when providing nursing care and when collaborating with clients, families, nurse colleagues, nursing students and other members of the healthcare team. It is important that registered nurses continue to reflect on the values, behaviors and relationships of their profession.

### Why is professional presence important?

#### CLIENT RELATIONSHIPS

When RNs establish caring, therapeutic relationships with clients they build trust in the nurse-client relationship. Exhibiting professional presence is a requirement of establishing that therapeutic relationship. The *Standards of Practice for Registered Nurses* and the *Code of Ethics* (2008) state that each RN is expected to demonstrate a professional presence with clients that leads to a trusting therapeutic relationship. These relationships are critical to understanding people's needs and concerns. Registered nurses can demonstrate professional presence verbally through an introduction, and non-verbally with appropriate body language that contribute to a trusting nurse client relationship.

<sup>1</sup> 2017 Standards of Practice for Registered Nurses Standard 3 Client Relationship and Advocacy Indicator 3.3

## INTRAPROFESSIONAL AND INTERPROFESSIONAL RELATIONSHIPS

The *Code of Ethics* states that RNs collaborate with other health care providers to maximize health benefits to clients while recognizing and respecting the knowledge, skills and perspectives of all.

Professional presence is also about managing the image RNs portray to other team members. Registered nurses must be aware of the importance of a positive image for nursing and take steps to support adherence to the standards and *Code of Ethics*. Professional presence includes developing collaborative relationships in a professional context with other nurses, the healthcare team, the organization and system, including governments, other agencies, associations, unions, facilities and the College. These professional relationships require:

- Active involvement in professional practice initiatives and activities;
- Acting as a mentor to RNs and colleagues, to enhance and support professional growth;
- Demonstrating respect and denoting recognition of interdependence among healthcare providers.

Registered nurses need to be able to explain to clients, families, communities and other health professionals the unique contribution of RNs to Nova Scotians. Articulating what RNs do and expressing the value and difference they make in communities and health care teams, is key to members of the team understanding the role of the RN.

### Exhibiting Professional Presence

#### INTRODUCTION USING FULL NAME AND TITLE

A visible nametag and an introduction, including your full name and designation as an RN should foster a sense of trust and begin to establish that therapeutic relationship. Clients have reported feeling as if this simple act of an introduction results in feeling as though the nurse is capable of providing safe, competent, compassionate and ethical care (Davidhizar, 2005). Stating your full name and that you are a registered nurse not only establishes your role as practitioner but also shows respect to clients and families. The *Code of Ethics* states that RNs clearly and accurately represent themselves with respect to their name, title and role. Would you share intimate details about your personal health with a person you have just met and cannot name?

In addition the registered nurse should ask the client how they want to be addressed. This may vary depending on personal preference. Many clients would rather be address by ‘Mr.’ or ‘Mrs.’, while others are more comfortable on a first name basis. These simple acts, which generally would take no more than one minute, are the first steps in developing this very important nurse client relationship and demonstrating a professional presence.

#### SPEAKING AND LISTENING

It may be cliché to say that communication is a two way street, but it’s true. Listening to clients with purpose is a demonstration of professional presence. When asked to describe presence a palliative client made the following statement.

*“I wanted them to be there for me. Not to give me advice, not to bother me...that if they were just there, that they wouldn’t tell me any advice, they were just there for me. That made me feel better.” (Hessel, 2009).*

RNs often want to provide all the answers, however clients and families may just want to be heard. Listening requires RNs to silence inner thoughts and focus on the client without judgment and without providing advice (Hessel, 2009).

Speaking with confidence and compassion often builds a trusting relationship and meets the needs of the client (Priest, 2012). Carefully select your language and tone of voice, speak clearly and allow time for the client to ask questions. Consider how it would feel to hear your words if you were the client (RN Career Search, 2009). If you are unsure, use an electronic device to tape your voice and tone to review the recording while reflecting on how the tone and pace of your communication may impact clients.

## NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION

Not only do words assist in establishing a professional presence with clients, but non-verbal communication also influences the nurse-client relationship. It is, “within seconds a patient will assess the RN’s professional identity, attitude, mood, and character attributes such as level of trustworthiness, based on the RN’s outward appearance and other non-verbal cues” (O’Lynn and Karutscheid, 2011).

Making eye contact as appropriate for cultural context when speaking, smiling during conversation, and projecting confidence in your nursing knowledge are all important non-verbal communication skills to help to establish a professional presence. Cultural awareness is also important when considering nonverbal communication with clients. Body language, eye contact and intonation can be interpreted very differently across cultures.

Standing over someone while talking or speaking to them while you are walking away may convey that you are too busy to listen to the client. Alternatively, sitting rather than standing when speaking with a client may convey the message that you are making time for the client and that what they have to say is important to you.

Using touch at the appropriate times can assist in the establishment of professional presence and help to build a strong nurse-client relationship. Holding a hand or a gentle squeeze of a shoulder can say much more than words.

Ask yourself if you are conveying interest, openness and attention in your nonverbal communication. If you are unsure about your nonverbal behaviors ask a trusted colleague for feedback. Ask them if you are doing something that distracts from the perception of your expertise, knowledge and skills as an RN.

It is also important to remember that professional presence isn’t just when a RN is face-to-face with clients but anytime an RN is visible to clients, like being in the hallway or the desk. For example, clients may overhear non-professional conversations by nurses at the desk or in the hall which may affect their trust and therapeutic relationship between nurses and their clients. All nurses must be aware of their professional presence at all times when working in a client-centered environment.

## APPROPRIATE USE OF TECHNOLOGY

Professional presence is a connection between the registered nurse and the client that requires an RN’s complete focus, including being free of other thoughts or actions (Hessel, 2009). Nursing presence has been described as physically “being there” and psychologically “being with” the client (McMahon and Christopher, 2011). In today’s fast paced world of health care there are many distractions that can limit an RN’s presence with the client and lead to an inability to establish a therapeutic nurse-client relationship.

The use of technology (eg., smart phones) at the bedside, in the community or in the home can be perceived by clients as a distraction. Distractions like this have the ability to negatively impact the connection clients may foster with the registered nurse(s) caring for them. If this type of technology is required in your nursing practice, RNs must explain why the device is being used and ensure that this doesn’t impede the establishment of a professional connection with the client. If it does, the registered nurse should consider other ways to provide care without using this type of technology at the bedside.

## EFFECTIVELY MANAGING MULTIPLE DEMANDS

The College is aware of the demands of time on registered nurses in today’s complex health system. However, demonstrating a professional presence does not necessarily require more time. Sometimes, all it requires is an intentional focus in the limited time RNs do have. In that sense, it is more about making the time RNs do have with the client a factor of quality and not quantity. For example, a simple introduction, kind words and tone, and active listening can establish a trusting relationship with clients in one minute or less. When asked to describe the effect of being present with a client this RN stated;

*“By slowing down by a few second or minutes to “catch my breath”, I believe I am able to provide safer...care. By spending 2 minutes longer with a patient the benefit is tenfold. Assessments are improved, patient anxiety is reduced and the nurse-client therapeutic relationship is strengthened”*

## Resources

The College is here to help support your professional nursing practice. Documents such as these listed below will help you as an RN to understand your obligation to establish professional presence with clients, families, communities and other health team members.

- [Registered Nurses Act](#) (2006) and [Regulations](#) (2006)
- [Standards of Practice for Registered Nurses](#) (2017)
- [Entry-level Competencies](#) (2013)
- [Code of Ethics for Registered Nurses](#) (CNA, 2008)

If you are having challenges with professional presence or if you have questions and need support on this topic you can always contact the College Practice Consultants at any time for additional information and/or support: [practice@crnns.ca](mailto:practice@crnns.ca) or 1.800.565.9744 ext. 256/250.

## Conclusion

Registered nurses play a key role in the healthcare system. The role that registered nurses will play in the future healthcare system in Nova Scotia will be influenced by the level of professional presence demonstrated by registered nurses today.

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