Questions & Answers

Nurse Practitioner Prescribing Controlled Drugs and Substances

Q. What are controlled drugs and substances?
Controlled drugs and substances are medications that include those prescribed to treat medical conditions such as pain, anxiety, attention-deficit disorder and other conditions. However, these medications also have the potential to cause patient harm if used improperly and for this reason are controlled by the Federal Government under the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act.
For more information, please visit the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act.

Q. What is a nurse practitioner and how do they differ from registered nurses?
A nurse practitioner is a registered nurse with advanced education, knowledge, and skills enabling them to provide leadership in the areas of health promotion, health management, and illness and injury prevention.
Nurse practitioners work closely with clients, families and other health professionals to address complex health needs and manage acute and chronic illnesses, within a holistic model of care. They engage communities in the development, implementation and evaluation of health programs and healthy public policy. Nurse practitioners have been part of the nursing community in Nova Scotia since 2002.
As of November 1st, 2014, all nurse practitioners licensed to practice in Nova Scotia will have received the necessary controlled drugs and substances education to assume this new authority.

Q. When was the decision made to enable nurse practitioners to prescribe controlled drugs and substances?
In November 2012 the federal government made changes to regulations under the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act that would enable nurse practitioners (NPs) in Canada to prescribe controlled drugs and substances. Because health care is regulated by the provinces and territories, NPs in Nova Scotia were not able to prescribe these drugs until they had the legislated authority in Nova Scotia to do so. Processes also needed to be in place ensuring NPs had the knowledge, skills and abilities to prescribe these drugs and substances.
On October 29th, the provincial government announced that nurse practitioners are now able to register with the Nova Scotia Prescription Monitoring Program, thus enabling them to prescribe controlled drugs and substances to Nova Scotians, as competent and qualified primary healthcare professionals.

Q. Are nurse practitioners qualified to prescribe controlled drugs and substances?
Yes. As of November 1st, all nurse practitioners licensed to practice nursing in Nova Scotia will have received the necessary education required to prescribe controlled drugs and substances.
To prepare nurse practitioners (NPs) in Nova Scotia to integrate prescribing of controlled drugs and substances into their practice, the College of Registered Nurses of Nova Scotia (CRNNS) worked collaboratively with other
regulators across Canada to look at nurse practitioner competencies. It was determined that the existing NP competencies appropriately reflected the over-arching knowledge and skills for NPs to prescribe these medications. In other words, this authority was already in the nurse practitioners’ scope of practice.

It was also determined that additional education on controlled drugs and substances would further prepare nurse practitioners to assume this new authority. CRNNS approved three existing controlled drugs and substances theory as a requirement for NPs in Nova Scotia.

In addition, because Nova Scotia has unique legislation and regulation related to the Prescription Monitoring Program, CRNNS developed a workshop that required mandatory attendance from NPs throughout 2014.

Q. Is there a greater risk of increased prescription drug abuse and misuse now that there are more health professional prescribing controlled drugs and substances to Nova Scotians?

No. This legislation provides Nova Scotians with greater access to timely primary care by simply adding nurse practitioners to the list of competent health professionals who are qualified to prescribe controlled drugs and substances.

The education that CRNNS required of nurse practitioners contains content specific to safe prescribing including risk assessment for addiction and drug diversion. As the regulatory body licensing nurse practitioners in Nova Scotia, CRNNS has implemented standards that require all NPs to verify every patient’s history of monitored drug use when they intend to prescribe a controlled drug or substance. This verification process happens by accessing the provincial government’s Nova Scotia Prescription Monitoring Program.

The College of Registered Nurses of Nova Scotia feels confident in the rigorous approach implemented to ensure NPs have the knowledge, skills, and ability to assume this new authority in support of public safety.

Q. So, initial education and training are in place. Are there any assurances in place that support the continued competence of nurse practitioners to prescribe controlled drugs and substances on an ongoing basis?

Yes. In addition to controlled drugs and substances education that is required of every NP licensed to practice in Nova Scotia, CRNNS will offer ongoing education via Telehealth sessions (ongoing every month or two), which will cover topics including diversion and risk assessment. CRNNS has collaborated with experts and will continue to collaborate with law enforcement and Dr. Peter MacDougall from the Atlantic Mentorship Network to provide education on risk behaviours and safe prescribing.

Q. How do I find out if there is a nurse practitioner in my community in Nova Scotia?

There are currently 126 nurse practitioners licensed to practice in Nova Scotia for the 2015 licensure year and they are located throughout the province. To find out if there is a nurse practitioner available in your community, please visit crnns.ca for a complete list.