

Integrating a Harm Reduction Approach in Nursing

Published: *December 2018*

All registrants of the College of Registered Nurses of Alberta (CRNA)¹ 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 as an approach to care. There is growing evidence that illustrates the benefits of harm reduction in supporting individuals living with, and families impacted by, substance use. A harm reduction approach aligns with a nurse's responsibility to use critical inquiry and evidence-informed knowledge to protect and promote an individual's right to autonomy, respect, privacy, and dignity.

CRNA Supports a Harm Reduction Approach

CRNA supports the principles of harm reduction and recognizes the need to support registrants in increasing their understanding and integration of a harm reduction approach into nursing practice. Since 2012, CRNA has supported the principles of harm reduction and the roles of registered nurses (RNs) and nurse practitioners (NPs) in the full range of harm reduction services.

The principles and conclusions contained within the Canadian Nurses Association (CNA) discussion document *Harm Reduction and Illicit Substance Use: Implications for Nursing* (2017a), focuses on a wide range of evidence-based harm reduction strategies such as outreach, overdose prevention, supervised consumption sites, heroin and methadone maintenance therapy, and housing.

What is Harm Reduction?

Harm reduction strives to reduce the consequences of actions that have an increased risk of negative health outcomes.

¹ CARNA is operating as the College of Registered Nurses of Alberta (CRNA).

Within the context of substance use, harm reduction refers to policies, programs, and practices that aim primarily to reduce the adverse health, social, and economic consequences of legal and illegal psychoactive drug use without necessarily reducing drug consumption. Harm reduction benefits people who use drugs, their families, and the community (CNA, 2017a).

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).

CRNA has continued to support a harm reduction approach in nursing practice by

- authorizing NPs to prescribe opioid agonist therapy;
- authorizing RNs to distribute Naloxone kits in the community setting;
- contributing to data to optimize client care through the Alberta Tracked Prescription Program (TPP);
- supporting continuing competence and education initiatives; and
- providing practice consultation.

Practice Direction

In order to support clients and families using a harm reduction approach, it is important for RNs and NPs to

- seek out and use evidence-informed best practices in harm reduction when caring for clients living with, and families impacted by, substance use;
- identify and reflect on their own personal beliefs and values and take steps to minimize the potential influence of these values and beliefs in order to provide unbiased care;
- protect and promote clients' right to autonomy, respect, and dignity;
- create a safe environment and engage in relational practice to build effective, trusting, and therapeutic relationships with clients and families;
- engage in continuous learning to build knowledge, competencies, and skills required to care for individuals and families using a harm reduction approach;
- be familiar with employer policy and seek out support in the practice setting to ensure safe, competent, and ethical care; and
- review and reflect on the following documents which provide RNs and NPs with 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:
 - *Entry-Level Competencies for the Practice of Registered Nurses* (CARNA, 2019) and *Entry Level Competencies for Nurse Practitioners in Canada* (CARNA, 2016) are the essential competencies that all RNs and NPs must possess to be proficient when they begin practice.
 - *Code of Ethics for Registered Nurses* (CNA, 2017b) provides a statement of the ethical values of nurses and 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 a nurse's responsibility to use critical inquiry and evidence-based knowledge to protect and promote the client's right to autonomy, respect, privacy, and dignity.
 - *Practice Standards for Regulated Members* (CARNA, 2013) assists nurses in decision-making and outlines practice expectations of the profession.

To learn more about harm reduction within the context of substance use and its implications for nursing practice

- engage in harm reduction education and integrate the principles into learning activities within your Continuing Competence plan;
- contact a Policy and Practice Consultant for questions related to your practice at practice@nurses.ab.ca or 780.451.0043 (toll free 1.800.252.9392); and
- contact the [Canadian Nurses Protective Society \(CNPS\)](#) for questions that you may have related to harm reduction.

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