

Working Independently, Nurse Practitioners are Vulnerable to a Unique Set of Risks

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Nurse Practitioners (NPs) are fulfilling a crucial role in Canada's healthcare system. For more than 50 years, NPs have been providing a vast array of advanced services in acute, chronic, and community settings.

The unique responsibilities and powers granted to NPs put these healthcare practitioners at unique risks which require specialized coverage. This article will cover the scope of practice and liability risks facing NPs in Canada.

Scope of Practice for Nurse Practitioners

An NP has a distinct scope of practice beyond that of a registered nurse. NPs are registered nurses who have additional education and nursing experience, which enables them to:

- Autonomously diagnose and treat illnesses
- Order and interpret tests
- Prescribe medications
- Perform medical procedures

Scope Varies by Province:

Though their scope of responsibilities may vary from province to province, they generally serve patients by:

- Diagnosing a disease, disorder or condition
- Communicating the diagnosis to the client and other healthcare professionals as appropriate
- Initiating, ordering, or prescribing consultations and referrals
- Ordering and interpreting screening and diagnostic tests (with some limitations)
- Recommending, prescribing, or reordering drugs (with some exceptions)

Can Practice Independently:

As independent practitioners, NPs work under their own authority as regulated health care providers. In Ontario, for instance, NPs can independently:

- Perform history and assessment
- Formulate and communicate a diagnosis
- Dispense, sell, and compound medications
- Set and cast fractures and dislocated joints
- Order and interpret lab tests
- Admit, treat, and discharge patients from hospitals
- Order some diagnostic imaging tests
- Consult and refer directly to specialists
- Prescribe all medications including narcotics and controlled substances
- Provide medical assistance in dying

Take a Holistic View of Health Management:

NPs are healthcare professionals whose foundations in care enable them to treat the whole person. Their approach includes:

- Addressing needs relating to a person's physical and mental health
- Gathering a patient's medical history
- Focusing on how an illness affects a person's life and family
- Offering ways for a person to lead a healthy life
- Teaching persons how to manage chronic illness
- Involving patients in decisions about their care
- Improving access to primary health care
- Reducing pressures on the healthcare system
- Gaining the trust of their patients
- Providing high-quality management of chronic illness, such as diabetes and high blood pressure

Patients at every stage of life receive benefits from the wide range of direct care services offered by NPs. In addition to treating illnesses, they teach individuals and their families about healthy living, preventing disease, and managing illness. NPs draw from their extensive medical knowledge, combined with the values and skills of nursing. NPs are also leaders, consultants and researchers who incorporate new knowledge into their practice.

Collaborative Working

NPs work in a variety of healthcare settings, such as:

- Community clinics, health-care centres, physicians' offices and patients' homes
- Long-term care and nursing homes
- Hospitals, outpatient clinics, emergency rooms and other patient areas
- NP-led clinics with their own team of nurses

Rather than replacing other healthcare providers, NPs work as part of a collaborative team that includes registered nurses, doctors, social workers, and others.

NPs also work collaboratively with patients to improve the healthcare experience. They do this by:

- Involving patients in decisions about their care
- Improving access to primary health care
- Reducing pressures on the healthcare system
- Gaining the trust of their patients
- Providing high-quality management of chronic illness, such as diabetes and high blood pressure

Claims Common to Nurse Practitioners

Common claims against NPs may come from:

- Failure involving core competencies, such as diagnosis, medication prescribing, or treatment and care management
- Allegations related to medical malpractice, failure to diagnose, and failure to follow standards of care
- Improper prescribing/managing of controlled drugs
- Failure to use equipment in a responsible manner
- Failure to communicate or document
- Failures in referral or consultation

A charge of negligence against an NP can arise from nearly any action or failure to act that results in injury or worse.

For example, a nurse has prescribed medication to their patient to treat an infection. Unfortunately, they overlook an ingredient their patient is allergic to. The patient has a severe allergic reaction and sues the NP for negligence.

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