

# Practice Guideline

## Determination of Death

The College of Licensed Practical Nurses of Nova Scotia (CLPNS) is the regulatory body for the Licensed Practical Nurses (LPN) of Nova Scotia. Its mandate is to protect the public by promoting the provision of safe, competent, compassionate, and ethical nursing care. The College of Licensed Practical Nurses of Nova Scotia (the College) maintains that LPNs are accountable for their own practice and actions at all times.

Death is one of the very important passages in life's journey. Licensed Practical Nurses (LPNs) are educated to provide support to clients and families in a variety of ways along this path. The intent of this practice guideline is to provide LPNs with information to guide decision-making and policy development as it relates to the determination of death in cases where death is an expected outcome.

For the purpose of this document, *death as an expected outcome* is an anticipated event, well supported in the written plan of care and directly related to the client's primary health issue(s).

### Determination of Death

In Nova Scotia, there is no requirement that the determination of death is to be performed by a specific health care professional. Determination of death, where death is clear, can be made by a health care provider or lay-person (Butt, 1999; E. Gallant, personal communication, 2013).

### Medical Certificate of Death

A completed Medical Certificate of Death is a permanent legal record of the death of an individual. It records the personal information about the deceased and the details of the circumstances of death that are legally required to issue a burial permit and to settle the estate, insurance, and pensions. A completed Medical Certificate of Death is required before visitation and funeral arrangements can be finalized and before funeral directors can prepare the remains of the deceased. The Medical Certificate of Death is also the source for mortality statistics. Prior to 2011, the medical doctor was the only professional authorized to sign the certificate of death.



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In December 2011, the Timely Medical Certificates Act granted nurse practitioners (or other qualified persons as authorized by regulation and in the circumstances defined by regulation) to sign a Medical Certificate of Death. A nurse practitioner who has completed the medical certificate of death education session may sign the Medical Certificate of Death in the following circumstances: (a) the death of a person was expected as the result of a diagnosed chronic or acute illness or conditions; and (b) there is no reason to believe that the death was a result of any of the circumstances referred to in sections 9–12 of the Nova Scotia Fatality Investigations (CPSNS, 2013).

### Role of the LPN

Determination of death (where death is an expected outcome) is an entry-level competency for LPNs in Nova Scotia (CLPNNS, 2012). Death is determined by physical assessment. It occurs at the cessation of cardiac and respiratory vital signs and is characterized by lack of apical pulse, dilated and fixed pupils, and absent respirations.

### Unexpected Death

Licensed Practical Nurses are not authorized to determine death in situations where death is unexpected, difficult, or under unusual circumstances. LPNs are expected to know and follow agency policy around notification and consultation in regards to unexpected deaths.

### Policy Development

The identification of context (e.g., how death is determined, documentation of death, and post-mortem process) surrounding the determination of expected death in the practice environment should be outlined in an agency policy. Establishing policy is a valid means for making practice expectations visible for all members of the team (Mund, 2012). LPNs acting as leaders are expected to advocate for and participate in the development of employer policies to support quality practice environments and their practice (CLPNNS, 2013).

### End-of-Life Issues

Discussion of end-of-life issues may provide useful information in examining development of a determination of death policy. The Code of Ethics for Licensed Practical Nurses in Canada adopted by CLPNNS in 2013 contains an ethical decision-making framework. This excellent resource helps LPNs and others through the process.

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### Acknowledgement

The College of Licensed Practical Nurses of Nova Scotia gratefully acknowledges the College and Association of Registered Nurses of Alberta for the use of their document: *Pronouncement of Death: Guidelines for Regulated Members* in the development of this document.

### References

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