

Practice Guideline

Caring for Clients Authorized to use Medical Cannabis

College of Licensed Practical Nurses of Nova Scotia
College of Registered Nurses of Nova Scotia



Introduction

The College of Licensed Practical Nurses (CLPNNS) and the College of Registered Nurses of Nova Scotia (CRNNS) are legislated to serve and protect the public interest through the regulation of individual licensed practical nurses (LPN), registered nurses (RN), nurse practitioners (NP)¹ and. Only RNs, NPs and LPNs or students of a nursing program can use the term nurse; therefore, in this document, the term nurse(s) will refer to all 3 classes (RN Act, 2006).

This practice guideline was created to provide practice guidance so nurses may understand their accountabilities when caring for clients authorized to use *medical cannabis*². This, as with all College documents, should be used in conjunction with Standards of Practice, Code of Ethics and all applicable practice guidelines and agency policies.

What is Medical Cannabis?

The term medical cannabis refers to the use of the whole unprocessed cannabis plant or its basic extracts to treat a disease or symptom (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2015). For more information on the use, dosing, adverse side effects and drug interactions associated with medical cannabis, view the [Health Canada's Information for Health Care Professionals: Cannabis \(marihuana, marijuana\) and the Cannabinoids](#).

How do clients obtain Medical Cannabis in Nova Scotia?

The [Cannabis Act](#) and [Cannabis Regulations](#) came into force on October 17, 2018. This legislation governs the use of both recreational and medical cannabis. In Nova Scotia the [Cannabis Control Act](#) was enacted on October 17, 2018 to further establish prohibitions relating to the purchase, possession, sale, distribution, consumption, cultivation, propagation and harvesting of cannabis for recreational purposes.

Under the legislation, clients must consult with an authorized healthcare practitioner to obtain a signed Health Canada Medical Document or similar form³ to gain access to medical cannabis. In Nova Scotia, nurse practitioners and physicians are authorized to issue the medical document. Under the *Cannabis Regulations* clients can access medical cannabis by:

- purchasing directly from a federally licensed seller;
- registering with Health Canada to produce a limited amount of cannabis for their own medical purposes,
- designating someone to produce it for them.
- if clients are over the age of 19 they can purchase directly at the Nova Scotia Liquor Commission, including through their online sales platforms.

Standard of Practice and Code of Ethics

The [Standards of Practice for Registered Nurses](#), the Canadian Nurses Association (CNA) [Code of Ethics for Registered Nurses](#), the [Nurse Practitioner Standards of Practice](#), the [Standards of Practice for Licensed Practical Nurses in Canada](#) and the [Code of Ethics for Licensed Practical Nurses in Canada](#) are core regulatory documents that guide nursing practice. These statements are the minimal expectation for any nurse in any setting or role (LPN Act, 2006; RN Act, 2006). They serve as a guide to the professional knowledge, skill and judgement needed to practise nursing safely (CLPNNS 2013; CRNNS, 2012).

1 The term RN includes NPs unless otherwise specified

2 These guidelines do not apply to clients who have been prescribed a synthetic cannabinoid (e.g. nabilone) or using cannabis recreationally.

3 For NPs, the activity of providing a medical document to authorize medical cannabis is referred to as prescribing (*New Classes of Practitioners Regulations - s.3(2)(a)*)

When providing care to clients using medical cannabis, nurses are accountable to follow their standards of practice, specifically relating to:

- Respecting client diversity
- Respecting a client’s right to informed consent
- Optimizing the client’s role in decision-making and the care process
- Advocating for and following appropriate organizational policy.

As authorized prescribers of medical cannabis, nurse practitioners are accountable to the standards of practice for registered nurses listed below as well as to specific NP Standards.

	REGISTERED NURSES	LICENSED PRACTICAL NURSES
APPLICABLE STANDARD	Standard 2: Knowledge-based practice and competence	Standard 2: Knowledge-based practice
WHAT IT SAYS	Each RN and NP has the required competencies to practice safely and provide patient centered care; they apply evidenced informed rationale in decision making and integrate research findings into practice. ⁴	LPNs possess current knowledge to support critical thinking and professional judgement (2.1). Apply knowledge from nursing theory and science, other disciplines, evidence to inform decision making and LPN practice (2.2).
WHY IT IS RELEVANT	Each nurse is accountable to know the process by which clients are authorized to use medical cannabis, indications for use, routes of administration, adverse effects, dosing and contraindication. Nurses should be aware of any new research or evidence relating to medical cannabis and advocate for appropriate policies. All nurses should advocate for continued research to establish a base of evidence for practice related to medical cannabis. The RN (including the RN manager or educator) is accountable to integrate research into practice. RNs and LPNs are accountable to evolve their practice based on evidence.	

	REGISTERED NURSES	LICENSED PRACTICAL NURSES
APPLICABLE STANDARD	Standard 3: Client relationships and advocacy CNA Code of Ethics (2008) Value and Ethical Responsibility C. Promoting and Respecting Informed Decision- Making Value and Ethical Responsibility F. Promoting Justice	Standard 3: Service to the Public and Self-Regulation Principle 1: Responsibility to the Public Principle 2: Responsibility to Clients

⁴ Standard 2 Indicator 2.1,2.2,2.11

	REGISTERED NURSES	LICENSED PRACTICAL NURSES
WHAT IT SAYS	<p>Each RN and NP respects and promotes clients rights to informed decision making and informed consent.</p> <p>RN's and NP's have a legal and ethical responsibility to respect a client's informed choice which includes choices related to lifestyle and treatment.</p> <p>Nurses refrain from judging, labelling, demeaning, stigmatizing and humiliating behaviors toward persons receiving care, other health-care professionals and each other.</p>	<p>LPNs engage clients in a therapeutic nurse-client relationship as active partners for mutual planning of and decisions about their care (3.1).</p> <p>LPNs respect the right and responsibility of clients to be informed and make decisions about their health care (2.1).</p> <p>LPNs respect and support client choices (2.1.1).</p> <p>LPNs respect the rights of all individuals regardless of their diverse values, beliefs and cultures (1.6).</p> <p>LPNs provide care to each client recognizing their individuality and their right to choice (2.6).</p>
WHY IT IS RELEVANT	<p>The nurse's role is to ensure clients have the information they require to make informed decisions about their health. Nurses accomplish this by presenting information in an unbiased and factual manner, ensuring all questions are answered and referring client to other appropriate sources as necessary.</p>	

	REGISTERED NURSES	LICENSED PRACTICAL NURSES
APPLICABLE STANDARD	<p>Standard 5: individual self-regulation</p>	<p>Standard 3: Service to the Public and Self-Regulation</p> <p>Principle 2: Responsibility to Clients</p>
WHAT IT SAYS	<p>Each RN and NP practices in accordance with relevant acts and legislation and recognizes and addresses violations of practice, legal and ethical obligations by self or others.</p>	<p>LPNs demonstrate an understanding of self-regulation by following the standards of practice, the code of ethics and other regulatory requirements (3.6).</p> <p>LPNs report to appropriate authorities and take other action(s) in a timely manner to ensure a client's safety and quality of care when unethical or incompetent care is suspected (2.5).</p>
WHY IT IS RELEVANT	<p>The nurse is obligated to report if they become aware a client has obtained medical cannabis using channels other than the legislation, a physician has not followed appropriate policy, or any other unlawful activity. The duty to report may be a simple discussion with the client or prescriber to seek clarity or it could mean reporting the issues to the manager or regulatory body.</p>	

NURSE PRACTITIONERS	
APPLICABLE STANDARD	Standard 3: Assessment and Diagnosis
WHAT IT SAYS	Using a holistic client-centered approach, nurse practitioners assess and diagnose clients, including those with acute and/or chronic health conditions and potential life threatening/emergent situations. Assessment and diagnosis are guided by the best available evidence and the determinants of health.
WHY IT IS RELEVANT	Nurse practitioners complete a comprehensive client assessment prior to prescribing medical cannabis, including all client health conditions when developing a diagnosis and considering prescribed medical cannabis as one of the available treatment options.
APPLICABLE STANDARD	Standard 4: Client Care Management
WHAT IT SAYS	Client care management is guided by the best available and evidence and the determinants of health.
WHY IT IS RELEVANT	Before prescribing medical cannabis, nurse practitioners must ensure that they possess the knowledge, skill and ability to do so. They limit their prescribing of medical cannabis to clients with whom they have an established client-provider relationship. As authorized prescribers, nurse practitioners are accountable to base all client management decisions client need within the context of the client's diagnoses and existing treatments.

Ethical Dilemmas

Nurses caring for clients authorized to use medical cannabis may experience an ethical dilemma. An ethical dilemma occurs when there are equally compelling reasons for different courses of action (CLPNNS, 2013; CNA, 2017). When there is a conflict between client and provider values or opinions about treatment options, nurses must apply principles from their respective ethical codes, such as the Code of Ethics for Registered Nurses or the Code of Ethics for Licensed Practical Nurses in Canada in framing their discussions with their clients. Both ethical codes have decision making models/frameworks which can assist nurses with addressing an ethical dilemma.

If a nurse is morally opposed a treatment, they may have difficulty in providing this treatment to clients. If the nurse can anticipate a conflict with their conscience (conscientious objection) they have an obligation to inform their manager as soon as possible (CLPNNS, 2013; CNA, 2017). The nurse has the right to follow their conscience in these situations; however, if the treatment plan is in keeping with professional practice, the nurse must care for the client until an appropriate alternative arrangement can be made to meet the client's needs.

Administration of Medical Cannabis

The *Cannabis Regulations* authorizes all nurses, including those working in home care settings, to possess and directly administer medical cannabis to clients who have authorization to use it. Employer policy should indicate practice settings where nurses are permitted to engage in activities relating to the administration of medical cannabis. Nurses are expected to be aware of their employer policies.

Nurses are expected to have the necessary knowledge, skill and judgment (competence) to be able to directly administer medical cannabis safely. This includes the following:

- Ensuring a client-specific order authorizing the nurse to administer.
- Ensuring the medical cannabis is appropriately labeled
- Competently administering or assisting with the administration of the medical cannabis
- Evaluating the effectiveness of the medical cannabis.

- Identifying and managing adverse reactions.
- Accurately documenting outcomes.
- Supporting clients to manage their own health.
- Storing, transporting and disposing of medications properly.
- Being aware of the employer policy.
- Educating clients on how to safely store.

Administration of Medical Cannabis Produced by the Client or Designate

The nurse may be asked to administer or assist with administration of cannabis produced by the client or a designate. The nurse must consider the risks to the client associated with the administration of any client supplied medication, including medical cannabis. The nurse should take reasonable steps to ensure the integrity and safety of these types of medications. The nurse should be guided by employer policies relating to the administration or assistance of the administration of medical cannabis which is produced by the client or designate.

Self-Administration of Medical Cannabis

When the client wishes to self-administer medical cannabis, the nurse must assess the clients capacity (e.g., judgment, memory, understanding, functional ability) and collaborate with the client (and family, if required) to establish and document a plan for self-administration. This plan should include the provision of all relevant knowledge (e.g., dose, frequency and route, expected outcomes, potential adverse effects, and ways to monitor the expected and unexpected effects of the medical cannabis).

Clients should be assessed regularly for their capacity to self-administer medical cannabis and their other medications. As with all assessments, these must be documented appropriately according to agency policy. If the client cannot participate in the administration, the responsibility may be assumed by a family member. A nurse may be expected to assist the family member. For example, the nurse may prepare the medical cannabis and pass it to the family member for administration.

Nurses should be familiar with agency policies (e.g. restrictions on practice, and documentation) related to self-administration of any medication including medical cannabis.

For further information related to medication administration see:

- [Medication Guidelines for RNs](#)
- [Medication Administration Practice Guidelines for LPNs](#)

Organizational Policy and Procedure

The responsibility for caring for the client authorized to use medical cannabis is a shared responsibility between nurses and authorized prescriber. The employer is responsible to develop and implement policies based on best evidence to support nurses to meet their standards of practice and the requirements any relevant legislation.

The Colleges recommend employers develop and maintain medical cannabis policies specific to (not an exhaustive list):

- Authorization
- Client Access
- Administration and assistance with administration processes (includes identified health care professionals authorized to administer)
- Use of patient's own medication (OTC, prescription, Narcotic or controlled medications)

- Storage and disposal
- Managing clients who choose to smoke medical cannabis

Conclusion

Nurses providing care to clients using medical cannabis must have knowledge of the treatment, respect client diversity and their right to informed decision-making, and ensure there is appropriate organizational policy. This practice guideline, in addition to consultation and support from the Colleges' Practice Consultants, can help nurses understand their accountabilities so they meet their standards of practice and provide safe, competent, ethical and compassionate nursing care to Nova Scotians.

If you have additional questions, please call a Practice Consultant at 1.800.718.8517 (CLPNNS) or 1.800.565.9744 (CRNNS).

References

- Canadian Nurses Association. (2017). Code of ethics for registered nurses. Retrieved from <https://crnns.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/code-of-ethics-for-registered-nurses.pdf>
- Canadian Nurse. (2010). *Medical marijuana for pain: An emerging field*. Ottawa: ON, Author.
- College of Licensed Practical Nurses of Nova Scotia. (2013). *Code of Ethics for LPNs in Canada*. Halifax: NS, Author.
- College of Licensed Practical Nurses of Nova Scotia., (2013). *Professional Practice Series: Medication Administration Guidelines for LPNs*. Halifax: NS, Author.
- College of Licensed Practical Nurses of Nova Scotia. (2013). Standards of practice and code of ethics for licensed practical nurses. Halifax, NS: Author.
- College of Registered Nurses of Nova Scotia. (2017). *Medication Administration Guidelines for RNs*. Halifax: NS, Author.
- College of Registered Nurses of Nova Scotia. (2017). *Standards of Practice for Registered Nurses*. Halifax, NS: Author.
- Gardiner, C & Ingleton, C. (2010). Commentary on Green AJ & De-Vries (2010) Cannabis use in palliative care- an examination of the evidence and the implications for nurses. *Journal of Clinical Nursing, 19*, 3253-3255.
- Green, A.J. & De-Vries, K. (2010) Cannabis use in palliative care - An examination of the evidence and the implications for nurses. *Journal of Clinical Nursing, 19*, 2454-2462.
- Health Canada. (2018). Cannabis for medical purposes under the Cannabis Act: information and improvements. Retrieved from <https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/drugs-medication/cannabis/medical-use-cannabis.html>
- Licensed Practical Nurse Act, c.17. (2006) Statutes of Nova Scotia. Halifax, NS: Government of Nova Scotia.
- National Drug Abuse Institute, (2015). *Drug Facts: Is Marijuana Medicine?* Retrieved from <http://www.drugabuse.gov/publications/drugfacts/marijuana-medicine>
- Philipsen, N., Butler, R.D., Simon-Waterman, C. & Artis, J. (2014). Medical marijuana: A primer on ethics, evidence and politics. *The Journal for Nurse Practitioners, 10(9)*, 633-640.
- Registered Nurses Act, c. 21. (2006). Statutes of Nova Scotia. Halifax, NS: Government of Nova Scotia.

© revised 6 November 2018

College of Licensed Practical Nurses of Nova Scotia
302 - 7071 Bayers Road
Halifax, NS B3L 2C2

College of Registered Nurses of Nova Scotia
4005 - 7071 Bayers Road
Halifax, NS B3L 2C2

All rights reserved. No portion of this publication may be reproduced in any form or by any means without the permission of the copyright owner.