

News Release

Highly educated health professionals underutilized in Newfoundland and Labrador: Licensed Practical Nurse report

(St. John's, November 29, 2006). Despite the need to utilize health care resources to their full capacity, Licensed Practical Nurses (LPNs) in some health care settings are not being permitted to provide nursing care to their full scope of practice. A report commissioned by the College of Licensed Practical Nurses of Newfoundland and Labrador (CLPNNL) notes that policies of some health care institutions are limiting the ability of LPNs to practice the competencies they have been educationally prepared to perform for patients/clients/residents in the health care system of the province in Newfoundland and Labrador.

"Utilizing LPNs to their full scope of practice can improve patient care, ensure more timely care and assist to make health care delivery more cost-effective," said Paul Fisher, Executive Director/Registrar of the CLPNNL. "Licensed Practical Nurses are highly educated health care professionals. LPNs want to provide the health care services for which they have been educated to perform and to expand on their skills by availing of continuing education opportunities to help meet the nursing needs of Newfoundlanders and Labradorians."

Over the past number of years, many LPNs have enhanced their education through additional competencies and longer educational periods. The enhanced abilities of LPNs, such as post-operative care, medication administration, intravenous (IV) management and complex dressing changes, need to be reflected in the health care system. This new report, developed by a Master of Nursing student in partnership with the CLPNNL, has shown that LPNs are being underutilized in a health care system that should be using all available resources to its maximum.

"Licensed Practical Nurses are educated professionals who can contribute to the quality of care for patients. LPNs are able to contribute so much more to the health care system with the necessary changes in policy."

The report highlighted a number of discrepancies between LPN education and the functions they can practice in the workplace. For example, post-operative care, 75 per cent of LPNs report competency in this practice while only 45 per cent report being allowed to practice in this area. Additionally, 60 per cent of LPNs report competency in IV management and complex dressing changes while only 15 and 18 per cent, respectively, practice these skills in health care settings.

"The College is willing to work with health care administrators and key staff to educate decision-makers on LPN capabilities. Education and communication will ensure that LPNs can contribute to patient care to their optimal potential. LPNs can do so much more for patients requiring assistance in the health care system if there are policy changes made to allow them to perform at their full scope of practice."

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Backgrounder

The study *Development and Implementation of a survey to assess the skills and learning needs of Licensed Practical Nurses within Newfoundland and Labrador* was undertaken as part of the Master of Nursing requirements for author Shirley Matchim, MN, RN. The study was submitted to the School of Nursing at Memorial University of Newfoundland in April 2006.

The research was supported by the College of Licensed Practical Nurses of Newfoundland and Labrador (CLPNNL). The CLPNNL is the licensing authority for Practical Nurses in Newfoundland and Labrador and regulates the profession to protect the public. Its mission is to promote safety and protection of the general public through the provision of safe, competent and ethical nursing care. The CLPNNL is responsible for determining standards for the education and practice of Licensed Practical Nurses (LPNs), ensuring they have requisite knowledge, skills, judgments and attitudes.

The study included a literature review of learning needs assessments for LPNs, LPN competencies and empowerment, and educational needs assessments. This study added to the existing, but relatively under-researched, body of literature on learning needs assessments specifically for LPNs. Additionally, the survey was exclusively designed and administered to explore Newfoundland and Labrador experiences.

A total of 380 LPNs, representing 53 institutions across the four provincial regional health authorities, were surveyed. The proportion of LPNs with 1-10, 11-20, and 21-30 years of experience in almost identical, with each representing approximately one-third of the profession. However, two-thirds of practicing LPNs are more than 40 years of age, with almost one-quarter of LPNs over the age of 50. The primary workplaces for LPNs are long term care (54.2%) and hospitals (42.2%). Regional representation in the survey was commensurate with the percentage of LPNs practicing in different regions across the province, with the Eastern region most heavily represented based on its concentration of health care institutions and population.

The survey asked respondents about their authorization to practice and educational needs regarding a sample of 22 competencies listed as part of the scope of practice for LPNs. These competencies ranged from blood glucose monitoring to a series of medication administration skills, and oxygen therapy to urinary catheterization. The full scope of practice includes more than 100 competencies in 11 areas of health care and professionalism.