

Nursing Education during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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COVID-19 has created an urgent need for more front line direct-care nurses. Nursing graduates are already in great demand, with senior nursing students being recruited as non-regulated caregivers. Both students and new graduates are entering a highly stressed health system that is facing unprecedented challenges. Without appropriate preparation, supervision, and support, these novice practitioners are liable to place patients and other health care professionals at further risk. High quality nursing education is, therefore, an essential service during the COVID-19 health crisis.

The Canadian Association of Schools of Nursing (CASN) is the voice of nursing education in Canada and the national accrediting body for nursing education. Its members are the 95 schools of nursing in Canada offering a baccalaureate and/or graduate nursing degree.

In responding to COVID-19, CASN has adopted the following position:

- a) High-quality nursing education must be maintained to safeguard the health of Canadians;
- b) Graduation of nursing students should not be delayed given the urgent health service needs;
- c) Nursing faculty/instructors must maintain their educator role during this crisis as nursing education is essential; and
- d) Creative and appropriately supervised ways of optimizing entry-to-practice competencies in senior students while supporting the delivery of health care services during this crisis is a priority.

As the accrediting body for nursing education, CASN will accept documented, innovative curricular changes that allow students to avoid delays in graduation and support health service delivery needs during the COVID-19 pandemic.

CASN has developed the following priorities to address the potential and actual challenges of COVID-19:

- **Continue to ensure registered nurses receive a high-quality education:** Reducing the educational preparation of nurses to address a shortage puts patients at risk in normal times; when health services are additionally stressed by a highly infectious, life threatening virus, the risks are magnified exponentially. Although innovation and flexibility are important, and although appropriately prepared and appropriately supervised nursing students may play a non-registered nursing role in the health care system, educational shortcuts for registered nurses must be avoided.
- **Urgently strengthen the educational preparation of nurses.** The graduating class of students need greater preparation to enter the current health care system. A series of national virtual, interactive video simulation scenarios addressing these added demands offer a solution. Currently, members of CASN's team of simulation certification instructors, and faculty with expertise in infection control and emergency nursing are voluntarily developing simulations related to patient and community assessment, personal protective equipment use, and nursing

care of patients (suspected and confirmed) with COVID-19. Financial support, however, is needed to build a robust set of resources.

- **Support the transition of new nurses.** Transitioning into the workforce is typically a significant challenge for new graduates because of the complexity of health care, the ever-increasing acuity of patients, and their limited practice experience. During the pandemic, nursing graduates are entering a health care system that is volatile and overwhelmed; this will not only add to the challenges they experience but has the potential of increasing the spread of the infection if supports are not in place. This is a joint service/education issue that requires an immediate collaborative, national transition support plan between governments, nursing education, and nursing services.
- **Protect nursing students and new graduates.** To ensure the safety and future capacity of our nursing workforce, protecting nursing students and NGs is paramount. Although young people typically experience a milder course of COVID-19, if infected they are liable to spread the infection to others including the vulnerable patients they care for. This will magnify the infection rate and increase mortality.

In summary, nursing education is an essential service at this time. The quality of the educational preparation provided to nursing students, the transition support nursing graduates receive, and the availability of appropriate personal protective equipment will have major consequences on the outcomes of COVID-19 on the health of Canadians.