



# BRIEF

## Supporting Professional Development to Invest in Quality Health Care (2013)

### **Background**

It is the expected standard of practice for all registered nurses (RNs) and nurse practitioners (NPs) in Newfoundland and Labrador to assume responsibility and accountability for safe, competent, compassionate and ethical care (Standard 1) and to practise using evidence-informed knowledge, skill and judgment (Standard 2). Additionally, all RNs and NPs must contribute to and promote measures that optimize positive client health outcomes (Standard 3). Standards related to healthy, quality professional practice environments outline the need for organizations to promote learning environments that encourage and support evidence-based practice and nursing research aimed at improving client outcomes (ARNNL *Quality Professional Practice Environment Standards*, 2013). Quality professional practice environments support satisfied, empowered nurses, quality client care, and efficient and effective health care systems. When properly supported, nurses can achieve greater professional growth and personal well-being, thereby enhancing their ability to provide safe, quality client care. Participation in professional development opportunities contribute to RNs and NPs meeting these standards.

In a February 2013 ARNNL random members survey, 77 per cent of respondents identified there were adequate supports in their work environments to allow them to meet professional development needs. However, in the four months since, RNs and NPs report widespread barriers and a downward trend to accessing professional development, impacting their ability to meet the above standards for practice. Members report that education leave, and in some instances annual leave, is denied to RNs and NPs to attend educational events - and financial assistance is severely restricted. This reported trend is concerning to ARNNL.

Professional development is the “systematic maintenance, improvement and broadening of knowledge and skills, and the development of personal qualities necessary for the execution of professional, technical duties throughout the individuals working life” (Morgan, Cullinane & Pye, 2008). Professional development provides opportunities to harness knowledge, nurture innovation and build collaborative networks. It enables RNs and NPs to develop the expertise required to ensure the delivery of evidence-informed and best practice approaches to improve the health of the population, to help achieve government’s goals (e.g., greater consistency of evidence-informed care), and to tackle critical priorities (e.g., diabetes prevention and management). In addition to improving client outcomes, several studies have demonstrated that providing registered nurses with professional development opportunities increases job satisfaction and decreases turnover (Lalonde et al., 2013).

### **Impact on Quality Care and the Workforce**

RNs and NPs have identified to ARNNL concern over their inability, within the province and nationally, to plan, deliver, and participate in a variety of professional development initiatives, such as clinical learning opportunities related to direct care (e.g., wound and palliative care), development of Canadian Nurses Association certification exams, presentation of research and best practice approaches at conferences, and participation in ARNNL leadership capacity building workshops. RNs and NPs in our province have expressed that these limitations directly impact quality care. Barriers to professional development also impact morale and job satisfaction, as literature identifies lack of professional development as one of the reasons RNs migrate (Kingma, 2001; McGillis Hall et al, 2009).

### ***Impact on Nursing Leadership***

Nursing leadership is a responsibility that all registered nurses must maximize in their practice. Strong, effective nursing leadership is essential to integrating and promoting quality outcomes (*ARNNL Nursing Leadership Position Statement, 2009*). In order for RNs and NPs to develop and expand leadership competencies, they require professional development to build capacity in nursing leadership, enable innovation and best practices, and lead the nursing team. In the February 2013 ARNNL random survey of members only 36 per cent of respondents indicated they had participated in leadership development initiatives in the past year.

Effective formal nursing leadership (i.e. management) is essential. The ARNNL 2012 *Survey of Nurses in Management Positions* reveals that more than 75 per cent of managers are the primary identifier, implementer, and evaluator of best practices and health care innovations. Additionally, 25 per cent of current nurse manager respondents will retire within five years, and 56 per cent by 2022. ARNNL is concerned that future nurse leaders will be ill-prepared to take on these formal leadership roles if professional development opportunities are limited.

### ***Time for a Demonstrated Commitment***

ARNNL believes that professional development is necessary as an investment in the quality of care, and in the sustainability of our professional workforce. Providing staff with the support of paid time off and travel expenses, as well as shift coverage has been reported as a best practice strategy to support professional development (Curran, Fleet & Kirby, 2006). The opportunity to participate in professional development is both a collective and an individual responsibility, shared by individual nurses, employers, nursing organizations and government. RNs and NPs are ready and willing to participate; nursing organizations are poised to provide learning opportunities. Now is the time for collective action from employers and government to ensure professional development is a priority in the interest of safe, competent, compassionate and ethical client care. Investing in professional development is a value added approach, leading to better health, better care and better value.

*References available upon request.*