Education Program Standards of Canadian Practical Nurse Programs

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In Canada, the regulation of health professions falls to provincial jurisdictions. Provincial legislation allows health professionals to self-regulate through provincial regulatory organizations, therefore the scope of practice and the role of a health professional can vary from province to province. Although each province has jurisdictional regulatory authority, national collaboration occurs between the provincial regulatory organizations to help align policy, procedures, and standards. No standard approach has been established for reviewing and approving practical nurse education programs, despite the fact that labor mobility laws in Canada allow licensed practical nurses transferability between provinces. This article presents the results of a jurisdictional scan of the Canadian practical nurse regulators' education program review standards. Overall, the results revealed two major areas of alignment: the language and operational definitions of the program approval processes, and a common set of educational program standards.

Because of Canada's highly decentralized health care system, the regulation of health professions falls to provincial jurisdictions. Provincial legislation allows health professionals to self-regulate through provincial regulatory organizations. Therefore, the scope of practice and the role of a health professional can vary from province to province. Although each province has jurisdictional regulatory authority, national collaboration occurs between the provincial regulatory organizations to assist with alignment of policy, procedures, and standards, such as the national practical nurse (PN) examination (Canadian Practical Nurse Registration Examination [CPNRE]). Founded in 2004, the Canadian Council for Practical Nurse Regulators/ Conseil Canadien de réglementation des soins infirmiers auxiliaires (CCPNR) provides leadership in national and provincial PN regulation. Their mandate is to support excellence in practical nursing from a public policy perspective. Although the CCPNR does not have jurisdictional oversight or a mandate to direct regulatory work, their purpose is to foster collaboration between all provincial and territorial regulatory organizations, enhance professional relationships, and support interjurisdictional decision making and resource allocation. The CCPNR also promotes regulatory accountability and responsibility, while recognizing governance and practice within the jurisdictions (CCPNR, 2017). Over the past 15 years, CCPNR has created a set of guiding documents that the provincial jurisdictions have adopted as standards and frameworks for practice, which include: the *Entry-to-Practice Competencies for Licensed Practical Nurses* (CCPNR, 2013c), *Code of Ethics for Licensed Practical Nurses in Canada* (CCPNR, 2013b), the *Standards of Practice for Licensed Practical Nurses in Canada* (CCPNR, 2013d) and *Becoming a Licensed Practical Nurse in Canada: Requisite Skills and Abilities* (CCPNR, 2013a). Moreover, before provincial regulatory registration, all but one province (Quebec, which has its own licensure examination) require PNs to successfully complete the CPNRE (Assessment Strategies Inc., 2017).

The Problem: No Standard Approach

Although labor mobility laws in Canada allow licensed practical nurses (LPN) transferability between provinces, there is no standard approach for reviewing and approving PN education programs. The CCPNR recognized a need to strengthen interjurisdictional trust in PN education programs and tasked a working group to assess the feasibility of standardizing the approval processes of PN education programs. The CCPNR's jurisdictional review consisted of three distinct phases: (a) an exploratory phase to map the various provincial program approval standards, (b) a development phase to draft a program approval framework based on common standards, and (c) an implementation phase to introduce the common framework in each province. This article presents the results of the exploratory and development phases, and identifies the opportunities and barriers to a national PN education standard.

Methods

In January 2016, the study team approached all 10 of the Canadian practical nurse regulatory colleges in Canada. All Canadian provincial jurisdictions were included. An environmental scan was conducted of each provincial LPN regulator's educational approval process.

The environmental scan consisted of an examination of each jurisdiction's regulator website, each province's legislation, regulations, program approval documents, informant interviews, and findings of a short survey. This information was collated to identify common themes. A short questionnaire of 10 specific questions was sent to key representatives of each province's regulatory body (n = 10). Questions were constructed to address topics that were not clearly articulated in the documents reviewed in the environmental scan. The legislation, standards, requirements, and common processes that each jurisdiction uses to approve PN education programs were analyzed, and common themes were identified. If needed, phone interviews were conducted for clarification. A content analysis was conducted to determine common standards and indicators.

Results

Jurisdictional information was gathered from each of the ten provincial regulators (Table 1); however, only nine sets of program approval documents were reviewed and compared. One set, from Quebec, was in French and therefore not included. Nine provincial representatives, with the exception of Quebec, completed the questionnaire. The results revealed two common features in each jurisdiction's documents: (a) program approval process and (b) educational program standards with relevant indicators.

The Approval Process

Each jurisdiction's documents had detailed documentation on how PN education programs are approved. All documents included the following information: (a) authority to approve, (b) application designations, (c) approval designations, and (d) evaluation procedures. To address the degree of variability, the processes were classified as follows: "comparable" indicated a high degree of alignment between jurisdictions, "somewhat comparable" indicated moderate degree of alignment, and "not comparable" indicated very little or no alignment. For example, all jurisdictions noted the same program approval designations; however, the operational definition of these designations differed from jurisdiction to jurisdiction. This example would be classified as "somewhat comparable." Table 1 outlines the commonly used approval designations and associated processes.

Authority to Approve

All jurisdictions were "comparable" in requiring a mandate statement that the PN is prepared for safe practice consistent with the *Standards of Practice* (CCPNR, 2013d), *Code of Ethics* (CCPNR,

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TABLE 1

Common Approval Processes Required in Each of the Canadian Jurisdictions

Authority to Approve
- Who can approve: Educational Committee
- Assures alignment with SOP, COE, and ETPC

Application Designations
- New Programs
- Established Programs
- Significant Program Changes

Approval Designations
- Full Approval
- Partial/conditional Approval
- Approval Revoked or Denied

Evaluation Procedures
- All had mandatory full program review (self-assessment and site visit) every 5 years
- All included mandatory annual reporting (via self-assessment)

Note. COE = Centers of Excellence; ETPC = entry-to-practice competencies; SOP = Standards of Practice.

2013b) and *Entry-to-Practice Competencies for the Licensed Practical Nurse in Canada* (CCPNR, 2013c). Each jurisdiction identified an educational committee (EC) to oversee program application and approval and provide recommendations to the regulatory colleges' boards of directors for final approval. Not all the jurisdictions specified the governance structure of the EC; however, each described the role and the EC specific to the relevant legislation that authorizes them to approve programs. Some, but not all, jurisdictions required EC purpose statements, vision and mission statements, and terms of reference.

Application Designations

Three types of program applications were "comparable": (a) new programs, (b) established programs, and (c) significant program changes. Although variance was noted in the designation titles, the definitions and functions were similar. For new program approval, the jurisdictional processes were found to be "comparable." All jurisdictions had processes for new programs and required regulatory college approval; however, the timeframe for application submissions varied. For example, program approval for new programs was less than 5 years in all jurisdictions, with each new program requiring annual reports on operations. Not all jurisdictions granted preliminary approval status. For those that did, interim reporting had specific requirements.

Most jurisdictions required existing programs to prepare a full program review every 5 years and undergo a site visit. Additionally, the EC can request a review at any time within the 5-year period. Not all the jurisdictions required an annual report, and the required elements of this report varied. All jurisdictions required a review for significant/substantial program changes;