

All regulated members¹ of the College and Association of Registered Nurses of Alberta (CARNA) are responsible and accountable for using their title, qualifications, and credentials in a manner that best informs clients about who their health-care provider is, and the professional title of the provider. Across Alberta, there are regulated members who hold doctoral degrees (e.g., doctor of philosophy [PhD], doctor of nursing practice [DNP]). The *Health Professions Act* (HPA) provides a regulatory structure for the use and authorization of titles, abbreviations, and initials that members of a regulated profession can use. Specifically, it authorizes and restricts the use of the title doctor or abbreviation Dr. in certain contexts.

Purpose

This practice advice document provides clarity around the authorization and restriction for using the title doctor and abbreviation Dr., and outlines the responsibilities and accountabilities for regulated members using this title or abbreviation when authorized to do so.

Key Responsibilities

Regulated members are responsible for:

- representing themselves clearly with respect to name, title and role (Canadian Nurses Association, 2017);
- minimizing role confusion and increasing role clarity with clients, families, other representatives, and the public, as they:
 - ◆ have the right and expectation to be informed regarding the title, qualifications, and credentials of their health-care providers; and
 - ◆ should be able to determine who is providing care to them and be confident that they understand the role of their health-care providers;
- increasing role clarity and minimizing role confusion within members of the health-care team;
- meeting the expectations for use of titles, abbreviations, and initials as outlined in the *Use of Title Standards* (2019);

¹ The term “regulated members” includes registered nurses (RNs), nurse practitioners (NPs), certified graduate nurses (CGNs), graduate nurses (GNs), graduate nurse practitioners (GNPs), and courtesy permit holders.

- communicating effectively and respectfully with clients, families, and other members of the health-care team to enhance client care and safety outcomes (CARNA, 2013);
- following all current and relevant legislation, regulation, and standards of practice (CARNA, 2013); and
- upholding ethical standards and providing nursing care that is in the best interest of the public.

Restriction and Authorization of the Use of the Title

Providing Health Services

The *Health Professions Act* s.128 (7) states: “No person shall use the title ‘doctor’, ‘surgeon’, ‘pathologist’ or ‘oncologist’ or the abbreviation ‘Dr.’ alone or in combination with other words in connection with providing a health service²” unless the person is authorized to use the title or abbreviation by this *Act* or another enactment.

For regulated members, using the title doctor and abbreviation Dr. when providing health services is not authorized in the HPA, the *Registered Nurses Profession Regulation*, or other legislation. Unauthorized use of protected titles and abbreviations can result in professional discipline, fines and other penalties as outlined in s. 129 of the HPA.

While not authorized to use this title when providing health services, regulated members are entitled to communicate their academic doctoral credentials through other means. For example, this could include listing the educational degree credential behind the name of the regulated member (e.g., John Smith, PhD, RN or John Smith, DNP, NP) or communicating academic doctoral qualifications during conversations with clients and families without using the title doctor or abbreviation Dr.

Teaching, Research or Administration

The *Health Professions Act* s.128 (8) states: “Subsection (7) does not apply to a person who uses the title ‘doctor’, ‘surgeon’, ‘pathologist’ or ‘oncologist’ or the abbreviation ‘Dr.’ alone or in combination with other words in connection with teaching, research or administration.”

² A health service is defined in the HPA as a “service provided to people: (i) to protect, promote or maintain their health, (ii) to prevent illness, (iii) to diagnose, treat or rehabilitate, or (iv) to take care of the health needs of the ill, disabled, injured or dying.”

As a result, regulated members who have earned doctoral degrees and are not providing a health service, are authorized by the HPA to use the title doctor and abbreviation Dr. when engaging in teaching, research or administration³.

In some instances, regulated members practising in education, research or administration may still be closely connected to the provision of health services, and interact with clients, families or other representatives. In order to comply with the HPA, minimize role confusion and increase role clarity, it is important for the regulated member to reflect on the following questions to determine the appropriateness of using this title:

- Does the work I am engaging in fall under the definition of a health service, as defined in the HPA?
- Does using the title doctor or abbreviation Dr. accurately represent my qualifications and abilities in relation to my roles and responsibilities?
- If I use the term doctor or abbreviation Dr., is it clear to clients, families and other representatives that I am doing so in my capacity as a researcher, educator or administrator?
- Is there a potential for clients, families and other representatives to misinterpret my qualifications, skills and abilities, and confuse me with another regulated provider authorized to use the protected title doctor or abbreviation Dr.?

References

Canadian Nurses Association. (2017). *Code of ethics for registered nurses*. Ottawa, ON: Author.

College and Association of Registered Nurses of Alberta. (2011). *Scope of practice for registered nurses*. Edmonton, AB: Author.

College and Association of Registered Nurses of Alberta. (2013). *Practice standards for regulated members*. Edmonton, AB: Author.

College and Association of Registered Nurses of Alberta. (2019). *Use of titles standards*. Edmonton, AB: Author.

Health Professions Act, R.S.A. 2000, c. H-7.

Registered Nurses Profession Regulation, Alta. Reg. 232/2005.

³ Refer to the document *Scope of Practice for Registered Nurses* (CARNA, 2011) for statements describing each of these domains of practice.