NANB

FAQ: Nurses Communicating Test Results

The nursing scope of practice is defined as activities that nurses[1] are educated and authorized to perform, as set out in legislation, and described by standards, limits, and conditions set by the regulator (NANB, n.d.). The role of the nurse is also impacted by the practice environment, the client needs, the individual nurse competence, and employer policies (Nurses Association of New Brunswick [NANB], 2019). All these elements determine if an activity is appropriate for a nurse to perform[2].

Can a Registered Nurse (RN) communicate test results?

Direct communication from the health care professional who ordered the test is best practice. This ensures continuity of care, clear lines of accountability, and lessens the potential for conflicting information being provided to the client. This also gives the client an opportunity to discuss and ask questions (College of Registered Nurses of Alberta, 2022). Roles and responsibilities of the most responsible provider regarding ordering tests, providing test results, and following-up with the client should be clearly outlined.

When communicating test results to client, the nurse must practice in accordance with relevant legislation, standards, regulatory requirements and employer policy (NANB, 2019).

There is no legislative barrier preventing nurses from communicating test results to clients in New-Brunswick (N.B.). It is important to note that RNs are not authorized to communicate diagnoses or make recommendations for the treatment of diseases or disorders. However, Nurse Practitioners (NPs) in N.B. are authorized by the *Nurses Act* to diagnose , communicate diagnoses, order and interpret diagnostic tests, and prescribe (NANB, 2018a).

RN SCOPE

RNs are authorized to formulate nursing diagnosis that are actual or potential health problems that can be prevented or resolved by independent nursing interventions (NANB, 2021).

Communicating test results may fall within the RN's scope of practice depending on the type of test, context and results, employer policy, practice environment, client needs, and individual nurse competence. When involved in communicating test results, the nurse must follow employer policy, processes, or clinical support tools[3].

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[1] The term "nurse" refers to graduate nurses and registered nurses for the purpose of this document.

[2] The Role of the Nurse and Scope of Practice Toolkit provides a decision-making tool to assist nurses in determining if a specific activity is appropriate for an individual nurse to perform.

[3] Providing test results may be authorized by a directive. A directive may be implemented for a number of clients when specific conditions are met and when specific circumstances exist (NANB, 2018b). For more information on the guiding principles for directives, refer to the NANB FAQ What Is a directive?

When nurses communicate test results to clients, the following practices support safe, competent, compassionate, and ethical nursing care:

- The nurse's role in communicating test results is clearly defined and supported by employer policy.
- It has been determined that it is in the client's best interest that the nurse communicates the test results.
- The authorized prescriber has previously discussed the purpose of the test, possible results, and their implications with the client.
- The communication of test results by the nurse has been discussed with the client by the authorized prescriber.
- The nurse has the necessary competency to share the test results, answer related questions, provide education and support to the client.
- The nurse documents all interactions with the client according to the *Standards for Documentation*.
- When results fall outside of acceptable range, the nurse and the authorized prescriber collaborate to determine who is the best provider to communicate the information to the client.
- When the result is unexpectedly out of range, critical and/or requires additional interventions or a change in treatment plan, the authorized prescriber communicates the results and the plan of care to the client.
- The authorized prescriber is available to discuss results/questions/concerns raised by the client.
- An established process is in place to ensure timely client support and guidance by the authorized prescriber when the required interventions fall outside of the RN's scope of practice.

Who is responsible to notify the authorized prescriber when test results fall outside of acceptable range?

Though reasons for ordering tests vary, the timely and accurate communication of results is central to ensuring the provision of appropriate care (Litchfield and al., 2015). Inadequate follow-up of results can lead to serious harm for patients (Litchfield and al., 2014). There must be clear responsibility for the review and follow-up of test results to ensure continuity of care in a timely manner, especially when the results are critical. The relationship between the nurse's role and that of any other health-care professional involved should be clearly defined to ensure the seamless provision and continuity of client care.

The *Standards of Practice for Registered Nurses* require that the nurse:

- recognize and take action in situations where client safety is potentially or actually at risk,
- practice in accordance with relevant legislation, standards, regulatory requirements, and employer policies, and
- advocate for and contribute to the development and implementation of policies, programs and practices that improve nursing practice and/or health care services.

This sets the expectation that the nurse is accountable to take action when aware of test results that could put the client at risk. The nurse must communicate concerns, lab reports, and test results in a timely manner and document that this was done, as well as the response (The Canadian Nurses Protective Society [CNPS], 2006).

Employer policies influence and direct practice at the organizational level (NANB, 2019). Therefore, nurses are expected to work within the role defined by employer policy, which is specific to the practice environment (NANB, n.d.). Employer policy is required to clearly define the lines of accountability of all health care professionals involved in the management and communication of test results. If no policies support this activity, the nurse is expected to advocate for and potentially assist in the development of supporting policies.

For questions regarding liability or risk management related to providing or communicating test results, NANB recommends that nurses contact CNPS at Contact us or at 1-800-267-3390 or 613-237-2092.

Questions on providing test results can be directed to a NANB Nurse Consultant at practiceconsultation@nanb.nb.ca

NANB

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