

Virtual Healthcare

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INTRODUCTION

The College of Licensed Practical Nurses and Health Care Aides of Alberta (CLHA) has the authority under the *Health Professions Act* (HPA) to carry out its activities and govern Licensed Practical Nurses (LPNs)* in a manner that protects and serves the public interest.

The use of technologies and telecommunication is an important component of healthcare delivery, known as virtual healthcare. As new technologies are integrated into society, healthcare providers are becoming more acquainted with using different technologies or social media platforms to provide healthcare and communicate with their clients.

The ease of communication resulting from new technologies can facilitate collaborative practice between healthcare providers. Additionally, new technologies increase access to care for clients who would otherwise have difficulty accessing in person care. Virtual healthcare can also reduce stress on the healthcare system by leaving in-person appointments available for people who need in person care.

While virtual healthcare has many benefits, there are some important considerations that LPNs need to consider before providing care virtually. Some concerns surrounding virtual healthcare include ensuring registration requirements are met where services are provided, complying with privacy legislation, information security management, and maintaining appropriate documentation and management of client records.

PURPOSE

This guideline supports LPNs to understand the professional and legal expectations and informed practices around virtual health. This guideline should be read alongside the CLHA standards of practice and the code of ethics.

DISCUSSION OF EVIDENCE

For the purposes of this practice guideline, virtual healthcare means the provision of nursing services or nursing communications between an LPN, a client, and/or another healthcare professional when the nursing service is provided at a distance through technology. It may be delivered through telephone, email, texting, videoconference, or other electronic means.

*In this document, "LPN(s)" has the same meaning as "regulated member(s)" in the *Health Professions Act*.

Virtual healthcare is known as telehealth, virtual nursing, telemedicine, telepractice, virtual health among other terms; for the purposes of this practice guideline, we will use the phrase virtual healthcare to describe nursing care delivered via technology.

Technologies for virtual healthcare can include mobile devices. Mobile devices are portable computing equipment with functions to access, store, process, and transfer information.ⁱ Laptops, tablets, or smartphones are just a few examples of mobile devices that allow healthcare providers to communicate with each other and with clients by telephone, text message, or email.

Goals of Virtual Healthcare

The goals of virtual healthcare are to collaborate and communicate with clients, legal guardians, and/or other healthcare practitioners in order to:

- provide safe, quality client and family-centered care;
- increase access to competent nursing services;
- maximize a client's health status and quality of life;
- improve client compliance and outcomes; and
- provide nursing care in the most efficient and effective manner.

Virtual healthcare includes the provision of nursing services which may include:

- supporting an integrated and holistic approach to client care, health promotion, and maintenance;
- teaching, counseling, and advocating on behalf of clients and their families;
- providing nursing assessments and client follow-up;
- monitoring vital signs such as blood pressure, blood glucose levels, or heart rate via devices for self-measurement;
- monitoring movements in and around the home via activity monitors; or
- responding to personal alarms by clients to let nurses or family members know when something goes wrong.

INFORMED PRACTICE

Registration requirements

To provide virtual healthcare nursing services to clients located in Alberta, LPNs must:

- Be registered with the CLHA (those registered on the provisional register may provide virtual healthcare provided they follow the CLHA policy on *Provisional Registration*).

LPNs are encouraged to confirm with their insurance provider or employer if liability insurance is adequate for virtual healthcare.

Alberta LPNs wishing to provide virtual healthcare services to clients located outside of Alberta, must:

- be registered in the jurisdiction where the client is receiving the services (if required by that jurisdiction); and
- follow all relevant legislation, regulations, and standards in both jurisdictions.

If there is a difference between Alberta's and the other jurisdiction's regulatory framework, the LPN must practice in accordance with the more restrictive requirements. For example, client information should be kept for the longer period specified in privacy legislation if different between jurisdictions.

LPNs should be aware of any responsibilities and liabilities of working in multiple jurisdictions including the potential requirement to travel to other jurisdictions for disciplinary hearings.

Core Competencies

The use of electronic technologies in LPN practice is an emerging area. LPNs engaged in virtual healthcare continue to follow the nursing process (i.e. perform an assessment, formulate a nursing diagnosis, plan, implement, evaluate and refer the client to another practitioner as necessary).

LPNs continue to use critical thinking, critical inquiry, and clinical judgment while providing virtual healthcare as they would for in person care.

They also demonstrate competence in the provision of nursing via technology and with the mode of technology used (e.g., mobile devices).

LPNs should ensure they have the knowledge, skills, and abilities to safely and effectively engage in virtual healthcare. If additional training is required to effectively perform virtual healthcare, LPNs are responsible to obtain this education.

Having in-depth knowledge and an ability to combine clinical experience, communication skills, and ethical awareness is essential when providing virtual healthcare.

While providing virtual healthcare, LPNs should:

- ensure they are competent to use any technology required for their practice;
- understand the technology's capabilities and limitations;
- have technology supports available if needed;
- evaluate individual competencies to support the use of these technologies; and
- develop skills related to the delivery of services using virtual technologies.

LPNs meet the same expectations for quality, competent care as nursing services provided in person.

Providing Virtual Healthcare

In providing virtual healthcare, LPNs should ensure they follow existing standards of practice and expectations for providing care consistent with the nursing process including, but not limited to, verifying the identity of the client and ensuring continuity of care between different healthcare providers. Employers may also have specific requirements for providing Virtual Healthcare that LPNs must follow.

When providing virtual healthcare, LPNs:ⁱⁱ

- Assess whether virtual healthcare is the most appropriate way to deliver nursing care; in determining if virtual healthcare is appropriate, the following should be considered:
 - Whether an in-person nursing assessment is required to complete the nursing diagnosis and treatment plan;
 - The ability to deliver substantially similar care as nursing care delivered in person;
 - Ensure that virtual healthcare does not expose the client to greater risk than other possible care delivery methods. This includes risks to the privacy of the client's health information or client safety, depending on the environment and context in which nursing care is to be provided;
 - The client's presenting condition and clinical history; and
 - If client factors such as physical, sensory, or cognitive deficits may impact the ability to deliver appropriate virtual healthcare.
- Explain the benefits and risks of virtual healthcare;
- Obtain the client's informed consent;
- Ensure their clients understand:
 - The care that will be provided by virtual nursing and how referrals and continuity of care will be managed;
 - How the client can contact them between appointments, if necessary;
 - How quickly they can expect a response to their messages;
 - What to do in an emergency situation;
 - To whom their health information might be disclosed and for what purpose; and
 - Fees for any uninsured services.
- Provide appropriate follow-up:
 - Have access to other relevant client information as necessary (e.g., pharmaceutical, laboratory, diagnostic imaging or hospital discharge information, etc.);
 - Have access to other resources as necessary (e.g., technology, support staff, linkages with other healthcare services such as diagnostic laboratory, etc.); and
 - Consider the relative cost, both for the client and at the healthcare system level.
- Recommend, direct, or arrange alternative healthcare if a client's health condition worsens or if it is in the client's best interest to maintain continuity of care (e.g., referral to another in-person healthcare practitioner, emergency room, etc.); and

- Inform the client of the process to follow if they have a concern or complaint about their nursing care, including their ability to lodge a complaint in either or both jurisdictions if they choose (when services are provided across jurisdictional borders).

Documentation

LPNs that provide virtual nursing are required to document the interaction in accordance with current CLHA standards of practice and policy on *Documentation*. However, LPNs should consider any additional information that may be necessary to record when providing care via technology such as:ⁱⁱⁱ

- The reason for providing nursing services via technology;
- The form of remote technology used in the provision of nursing services;
- Where the client resides; and
- The privacy and security measures used to protect the client's private information.

If a client consents to video or audio recording of their care, LPNs should retain these recordings as part of the client's health record when practicing virtual healthcare.

When providing virtual healthcare to a client who is outside of Alberta, LPNs:

- Comply with the documentation standards of both jurisdictions; and
- Retain the client's health record for the longer period required between the two jurisdictions, if different.

Privacy and Confidentiality Considerations

Working with technology to provide virtual healthcare involves privacy and confidentiality considerations under legal requirements (e.g., *Health Information Act*, *Personal Information Protection Act*, *Protection of Privacy Act*, and *Access to Information Act*).

LPNs:

- Comply with all privacy and security requirements both during virtual healthcare sessions and when in contact with the client through other electronic means, such as arranging appointments via email;
- Ensure the virtual technology platform they are using adheres to any legislative requirements for privacy;
- Employ authentication and encryption technologies as well as secure transmission systems and storage mechanisms;
- Secure all physical devices used in virtual healthcare and when storing information related to virtual healthcare services;
- Are aware of any employer policies for privacy and security related to virtual healthcare;

- Maintain awareness of current and emerging risks to client privacy inherent to virtual healthcare and employ measures to address these risks; and
- If self-employed, develop policies and practices to ensure that client records cannot be accessed by unauthorized users, tampered with or destroyed, and are protected at both the originating and remote sites.^{iv}

Strategies When Using Technologies for Virtual Healthcare

Practicing in virtual healthcare requires the LPN to consider aspects of nursing and the management of information technologies. Technologies may fail, be disconnected, or have other issues.

LPNs should:

- Obtain access to appropriate technical support for troubleshooting in the event of technical difficulties;
- Test all technologies prior to client appointments to ensure the system is functioning well;
- Have an alternative method of contacting the client in place. For example, in the case of an internet failure being able to telephone the client;
- Have a safety protocol in place in the event of an emergency or adverse event, including:
 - Contact information for local first responders (using designated phone numbers rather than 911);
 - Contact information for emergency contacts and client consent to contact these individuals in the event of an emergency or adverse event;
 - Emergency response plans and procedures to follow and manage adverse events while waiting for assistance to arrive; and
 - Procedures for managing adverse events that do not require assistance from first responders;
- Be aware of other service providers in the client's geographical area that they may refer the client to in the event of a client adverse event or complication;
- Facilitate the transfer of care to another healthcare practitioner if the LPN or client determines that virtual healthcare is not appropriate or not meeting client needs.^v

CONCLUSION

The CLHA acknowledges the growing need for virtual healthcare services in Alberta. LPNs are an integral part of the healthcare team and have a role in the delivery of virtual healthcare.

This document outlines expectations of providing virtual healthcare in a safe, competent, and ethical virtual manner.

Documents are updated frequently. For the most current version and access to related documents and resources, please visit the Knowledge Hub on clha.com.

If after reading this document you have questions, please contact the CLHA's Professional Practice Team via practice@clha.com or 780-484-8886 or 1-800-661-5877 (toll free in Alberta).

REFERENCES

ⁱ College of Physicians & Surgeons of Alberta (CPSA), Electronic Communications & Security of Mobile Devices – Advice to the Profession (2020), https://cpsa.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/AP_Electronic-Communications-Mobile-Devices.pdf

ⁱⁱ The College of Physicians and Surgeons of Alberta (CPSA), *Telemedicine*. (2019) http://www.cpsa.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/AP_Telemedicine.pdf; Physiotherapy Alberta College + Association, *Telerehabilitation Resource Guide for Alberta Physiotherapists* (2018), https://www.physiotherapyalberta.ca/files/guide_telerehabilitation.pdf, College of Alberta Psychologists, *Telepsychology Services*. (2018). <https://www.cap.ab.ca/Portals/0/pdfs/Practice%20Guideline-%20Telepsychology%20Services.pdf?ver=2019-12-03-110441-087×tamp=1575396294218>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Physiotherapy Alberta College + Association, *Telerehabilitation Resource Guide*; British Columbia College of Nursing Professionals (BCCNP) (formerly CRNBC), *Telehealth* (2011), https://www.bccnp.ca/Standards/RN_NP/PracticeStandards/Lists/GeneralResources/RN_NP_PS_Telehealth.pdf.

^{iv} Physiotherapy Alberta College + Association, *Telerehabilitation Resource Guide*; College of Alberta Psychologists, *Telepsychology Services*.

^v Physiotherapy Alberta College + Association, *Telerehabilitation Resource Guide*; College of Alberta Psychologists, *Telepsychology Services*.