

**Editor's Note:**

During the past couple of years we have featured a series of scope of practice articles in each issue of the *RN Journal*. This year, to further the discussion and to highlight the characteristics of scope of practice we will be featuring articles about various groups of registered nurses and their practice. This article is the fourth in the series. If you are interested in writing an article about your area of practice, please email us at info@crnm.mb.ca

Scope of Practice Series: Clinical Nurse Specialists

Where there's a vulnerable patient population, there's a clinical nurse specialist.

CLINICAL nurse specialists work with babies born at small birth weights or with life threatening illness or disease, palliative care patients, street populations and much more. Regardless of their patient population, all CNS' operate according to the Strong Model of Advanced Practice. This model defines five domains of practice that comprise the advanced nursing practice role: direct comprehensive care, support of systems, education, research, publication and professional leadership.

"Every day is different but you practice in each of the domains every single day," says Doris Sawatzky-Dixon RN, a CNS in the neonatal intensive care unit at the Health Sciences Centre.



Both Brenda Hearson RN (left) and Simone Stenekes RN are clinical nurse specialists for Canadian Virtual Hospice. Brenda is also associated with the WRHA Palliative Care Program, while Simone is associated with the WRHA Palliative Care Integrated Team.

CNS' are registered nurses with advanced nursing education and extensive clinical experience. They spend most of their time reviewing and developing policies and clinical guidelines, conducting literature reviews on best practice and promoting the use of evidence, providing expert support and consultation to members of the healthcare team, patients and families, and working towards quality improvement and system change.

CNS' differ from other registered nurses in a number of ways. One example is their education level - CNS' generally have a master's degree or doctoral degree in nursing with expertise in a particular setting. Other differences include their degree of clinical autonomy, specialized clinical knowledge and an emphasis on research, education and leadership components of the CNS role.

Sawatzky-Dixon sets aside two half days to spend in clinical practice and another half day specifically for meeting with families. "I check on patients and meet with families and provide them with education and support that they might not be able to get anywhere else."

For Diane Heywood RN, a clinical nurse specialist at Nine Circles Community Health Centre, more time is spent on the other domains of the Strong Model.

"I have a lot of opportunities to meet and work with other staff," says Heywood. "I support them in their practice and help them to maximize what they do."

In order to support the health care team, CNS' engage in consultation with their provincial, national and international counterparts, conduct research and evaluation and provide education on best practices. They also arrange and present at conferences, giving them a chance to share their knowledge and expertise in their particular domain.

To fulfill these wide-ranging responsibilities, clinical nurse specialists need to have an eclectic array of skills says Sawatzky-Dixon. In addition to clinical expertise and substantial practice experience, "you need really good computer skills, change management skills, project management skills and also writing and editorial skills," she says.

Much of the CNS' work takes place behind the scenes. Simone Stenekes RN, a CNS who specializes in pediatric palliative care says, "It can be hard for people to understand the role of a clinical nurse specialist because our work is invisible."

Although their work might sometimes be invisible, the impact is not.



“When we witness staff practice according to a new guideline we’ve created and see that it’s working well it’s very rewarding,” says Brenda Hearson RN, clinical nurse specialist for Canadian Virtual Hospice and the WRHA Palliative Care Program. “And when we see that our practice has made a difference and impact on the care of a patient or their family, that’s also very rewarding.”

References

Canadian Nurse (2008). Clinical nurse specialists in a web-b@sed practice environment

Winnipeg Regional Health Authority (2006). Improve patient care and outcomes: adding a clinical nurse specialist to your team

Diane Heywood RN in front of a poster presentation she co-developed about the WRHA leading practice ‘Overcoming Inequities: Reaching Hard-to-Reach Populations’ during the H1N1 pandemic.

