

REGISTERED NURSES, HEALTH AND HUMAN RIGHTS

CNA POSITION

The Canadian Nurses Association (CNA) believes that “promoting and protecting health and respecting, protecting and fulfilling human rights are inextricably linked.”¹ “Access to health care is a fundamental human right, enshrined in international treaties and recognized by governments throughout the world,”² and nurses are central to ensuring that access.

CNA believes in a rights-based approach to health, and that the creation of a client-centred health system is paramount to fulfilling the human right to health. CNA’s position on human rights is in accordance with the United Nations’ *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (UDHR) and the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*.

Health professionals play an essential role in ensuring the fulfillment of the right to health. CNA concurs with the belief of the International Council of Nurses that “nurses have an obligation to safeguard and actively promote people’s health rights at all times and in all places.”³

CNA’s *Code of Ethics for Registered Nurses* – a “statement of the ethical values of nurses and nurses’ commitments to persons with health-care needs and persons receiving care,”⁴ specifies that all people receiving care are to be treated with respect. The code also states that “nurses uphold principles of justice by safeguarding human rights”⁵ and that nurses must, as an ethical endeavour, maintain “awareness of broader global health concerns, such as violations of human rights.”⁶

CNA recognizes that all human rights are interdependent and indivisible⁷ and that an individual’s health and well-being can be harmed when his or her human rights in any category are violated.

Nurses are accountable for their own actions and inactions in safeguarding human rights. Where nurses experience conflict between performing professional duties and fulfilling obligations to their employer or other authority, their primary responsibility is to those who require care.⁸

Nurses have legal and professional rights to practise in environments that provide personal safety; that are free from abuse, violence, threats and intimidation; and in which there is no fear of reprisal.⁹

¹ (World Health Organization [WHO], n.d.)

² (WHO, 2011, para. 1)

³ (International Council of Nurses [ICN], 2006, p. 1)

⁴ (Canadian Nurses Association [CNA], 2008, p. 1)

⁵ (Ibid, p. 17)

⁶ (Ibid, p. 21)

⁷ (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2011)

⁸ (ICN, 2006)

⁹ (Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety, 2008)

Nursing organizations can use their influence to safeguard health as a human right. For example, they play a role by making information available, such as the CNA *Code of Ethics for Registered Nurses*, which outlines the nurse's ethical duty to “uphold [the] principles of justice by safeguarding human rights, equity and fairness and by promoting the public good.”¹⁰ “Effective mechanism[s] through which nurses can seek confidential advice, counsel, support and assistance in dealing with difficult human rights situations” should be made available by nursing organizations.¹¹

It is the responsibility of governments to uphold human rights legislation and to comply with international declarations and treaties to which they are signatories.

BACKGROUND

In 1946, the World Health Organization recognized “the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health” as a fundamental right of every human being.¹²

CNA concurs with the *Declaration of Alma-Ata* on primary health care, which affirms that health is a fundamental human right.¹³

There exists an interconnected family of rights of equal importance that emanate from the UDHR, which include health, political, social, cultural and economic rights. Violations of these rights can have a direct or indirect impact on health.¹⁴

It is recognized that, “by design, neglect or ignorance, health policies and programs can promote and protect or conversely restrict or violate human rights.”¹⁵ Integrating human rights concerns into health-care strategies can reduce infringements and violations. Training, awareness-raising, education, information and other resources can sensitize health policy-makers and practitioners to these possible impacts and help them in evaluating the effects of health policies and programs on human dignity and rights.

*Approved by the CNA Board of Directors
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¹⁰ (CNA, 2008, p. 17)

¹¹ (ICN, 2006, p. 1)

¹² (WHO, 1946, p. 1)

¹³ (WHO, 2005)

¹⁴ (Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2010)

¹⁵ (Brundtland, 1998, p. 23)



References:

- Brundtland, G. H. (1998). Fifty years of synergy between health and rights. *Health Human Rights*, 3(2): 21-15.
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- International Council of Nurses. (2006). *Nurses and human rights* [Position statement]. Geneva: Author.
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Also see:

Related CNA position statements:

Global Health and Equity (2009)

Global Health Partnerships (2011)

Peace and Health (2009)

Replaces:

Registered Nurses and Human Rights (2004)

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