

# Defining a Role for Primary Health Care Nurse Practitioners in Rural Nova Scotia



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## THE ISSUE

The rural Nova Scotia population is aging and has many social and economic challenges including unemployment, stress and depression, chronic diseases, obesity, tobacco use and sexual health concerns. Health board chairs and health care providers indicate that primary health care services are inadequate and do not meet the needs of the rural community. A Nurse Practitioner (NP) role could address these gaps in health services by reducing wait times for common urgent issues and by providing routine preventative care, women's health services, well child screening, early detection of disease and other social or mental health services.

## THE PURPOSE

To define the role for primary health care NPs in rural Nova Scotia.

## What did we do?

Using a mixed methods study design, we interviewed 9 health board chairs and surveyed 51 health care providers including NPs, family physicians, public health nurses and family practice nurses about their perceptions of the health needs in rural communities, gaps in service, the envisioned role for NPs in rural primary health care services and barriers and facilitators to achieving this.

## What did we find?

- Gaps in the current model of care included accessibility to prevention-focused care and timely access to non-emergent primary health care services.
- Board Chairs identified NPs provide preventive health services and care for acute and chronic illness and social and mental health concerns including outreach to vulnerable populations.
- At least 75% of health care providers indicated that NPs should perform assessments, diagnostic activities and procedures and prescribe pharmaceuticals.
- Facilitators enhancing NP role implementation included role clarity and physician support
- Barriers were lack of funding, resistance from other health care professionals and restrictions on scope of practice.

## How will this research help?

This study has confirmed a need for NPs in primary health care delivery in rural Nova Scotia and has identified factors that will facilitate NP role implementation and those that pose barriers. A core role for NPs has been described with emphasis on individual and family-focused activities to promote health, prevent illness, reduce injury and treat acute and chronic diseases. To successfully utilize the NP role, the barriers will need to be addressed. Changes in medical and nurse education can help to increase understanding of the NP role and increase collaboration among professionals. Funding and salary support for NPs remain critical issues and require consideration of new funding models.

## What's next?

The practice patterns of Nova Scotia NPs and the collaborative practice models in which they practice will be studied.

## BOTTOM LINE?

Health care providers and Health Board Chairs view the NP role as a viable solution to address the changing health care needs and service requirements in rural Nova Scotia communities.

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