

Training for Northern LPNs

Niche Profile

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Introduction

This report is based on the assumption that Licensed Practical Nurses working in northern Alberta, particularly those working in small, remote communities, face different situations than do their counterparts in more urban settings. Thus based, it examines the demand for extra training designed to help northern LPNs perform their expanded roles.

This report is a summary of conversations with nursing supervisors and others in the field from several northern health regions. According to most of those contacted there is some value in such training. The more pressing need however, appears to be simply for more LPNs. There is a current shortage in the region which is expected to grow over the next five years.

Training Needs

The Professional Council of Licensed Practical Nurses (PCLPN) has 4300 members province-wide, of whom an estimated 1200 work in the Clearinghouse region. Most of these likely work in larger centres. The number of LPNs in remote, northern communities is roughly estimated to be about 400 at most.

Of the people interviewed for this report, those operating in smaller communities were more likely to support additional training for LPNs than were those in larger centres. People who do see additional training needs listed two main areas where additional training would be useful.

Practical Skills

In remote communities LPNs are increasingly working alongside Registered Nurses, doing the same tasks. As a result they need to develop practical skills beyond their normal training program. In addition, smaller institutions do not have enough nurses or LPNs on staff to allow people to specialize in one sort of medicine; their staff need a wide range of skills.

The main skill sets needed by northern LPNs include:

- fetal monitoring
- neo-natal resuscitation
- obstetrics
- cardiac care
- basic trauma life-support.

Working in Small, Aboriginal Communities

Many northern LPNs serve largely aboriginal populations. If the LPNs themselves are non-aboriginal it will be important for them to receive training in:

- communication in aboriginal communities
- traditional healing and beliefs
- confidentiality issues in a small community
- community dynamics

The last two on this list are applicable to small non-aboriginal communities as well. Another related skill that one contact recommends for LPNs is the ability to promote health care to the community. One contact suggested that newly graduated LPNs generally need to develop their functional, hands-on skills, particularly in physical patient care and caseload management.

Current Training

The Professional Council of Licensed Practical Nurses (PCLPN) approves LPN training programs through the Educational Standards Advisory Committee. Successful programs are approved for five years at a time. LPN training underwent a major review in 1994 and continues to be updated as needed.

In northern Alberta, AVC - Lesser Slave Lake offers LPN training via distance, or through other colleges. This is a 48-week, four-semester program. AVC - LSL also offers a Practical Nurse Re-Entry program at various locations.

Some training in the practical skills identified above (fetal monitoring, etc.) is apparently available in northwestern Alberta, offered by Grant McEwan Community College. Such courses may be available for delivery through northern institutions. Clearinghouse partners should contact GMCC and/or the PCLPN for further information.

Suggestions for Northern LPN Training

One contact suggested that the Post-RN Rural Nursing Certificate offered by Grande Prairie Regional College would be good model to follow for a northern LPN program. This program includes courses in Rural Nursing, Coronary Care Nursing, Emergency Nursing Maternal-Infant Nursing and Physical Assessment. In the case of LPNs these topics could be offered as individual short courses or they could be part of a new training program which would have to be approved by the PCLPN.

One interviewee pointed out that there would be some interest in a “bridging” program that would enable LPNs to upgrade their credentials to become RNs.

All of those interviewed agreed that the strongest need right now is for more qualified LPNs, as well as RNs. There is a shortage now, and with a large number of LPNs approaching retirement age, this is expected to grow to a crisis five years from now. This suggests that, in terms of employer demand for graduates, there is room for more LPN training programs in northern Alberta.

Summary

Overall, it appears that there is a need to train Licensed Practical Nurses to deal with the demands of working in small, remote communities. In such settings they will need a wide range of skills at levels close to those of Registered Nurses. This training could be offered as part of a new LPN program, as a post-certification program or as a series of short courses delivered at times and places that would make them accessible for remote LPNs.

The demand for this specific training is overshadowed however, by the overall demand for new LPNs throughout northern Alberta. This demand is expected to grow over the next five years. As a result, new and expanded LPN training programs are needed to fill the employment demand.

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