

PRACTICING OUTSIDE THE SCOPE OF SOCIAL WORK

ISSUE

The role of the Alberta College of Social Workers is to govern registered social workers in a manner that protects and serves the public interest. The profession of social work has a scope of practice which is outlined in Schedule 27 of the *Health Professions Act*. Social workers may practice outside the scope of social work practice, provided the activity performed is not a restricted activity and the social worker can safely and competently perform the activity. Competence to perform the activity may be gained through education, training, and/or supervised experience.

BACKGROUND

It is important for social workers to understand which activities are considered to be within the scope of social work practice, as well as which restricted activities the profession of social work is authorized to perform.

Social Work Scope of Practice is outlined in Schedule 27 (section 3) of the HPA:

Schedule 27 states that in their practice, social workers do one or more of the following:

- (a) enhance or restore the social functioning of individuals, families, groups, organizations and communities by improving developmental, problem-solving and coping capacities of people and systems,
- (b) promote effective and humane systems that provide resources, opportunities and services to people and link people to those systems,
- (c) contribute to the development and improvement of social policy, and
 - (c.1) teach, manage, and conduct research in the science, techniques and practice of social work, and
- (d) provide restricted activities authorized by the regulations.

In Alberta, the legislation does not protect or restrict the scope of practice for social workers, but instead recognizes that the regulated health professions have over-lapping scopes of practice. Furthermore, the activities outlined within the scope of social work may be performed by people from other disciplines, including those who are not regulated health professionals. When people outside the profession of social work provide these services, it is not considered social work.

RESTRICTED ACTIVITIES

Restricted activities are high risk activities performed as part of providing a health service that require specific competencies to be carried out safely. Restricted activities may only be performed by the health professions specifically authorized to perform them. Social work is authorized to perform the restricted activity of psychosocial intervention, which is defined as follows:

To perform a psychosocial intervention with an expectation of treating a substantial disorder of thought, mood, perception, orientation or memory that grossly impairs:

- i. judgment,
- ii. behaviour,
- iii. capacity to recognize reality, or
- iv. ability to meet the ordinary demands of life.

PRACTICING OUTSIDE THE SOCIAL WORK SCOPE OF PRACTICE

In accordance with the Standards of Practice (2019), when practicing outside the social work scope of practice, social workers are expected to identify themselves as a registered social worker and to clearly represent their qualifications and the nature of the services and actions being provided in an honest and accurate manner (s. B (1.d), G.4).

Social workers may practice outside of the scope of social work practice, provided the activities being performed are not restricted. Social workers are always accountable to the Standards of Practice and must limit their practice to areas in which the social worker has gained competence through education, training, or supervised experience (s. E(4)(b)). Provided the activity is not restricted by the *Health Professions Act* or other relevant legislation, a social worker may apply this standard. Below are examples of how this standard relates to the performance of COVID-19 medical swabbing and injections for overdose response.

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL WORKERS IN COVID-19 MEDICAL SWABBING

COVID-19 testing, contact tracing, and sharing health information remain a priority in Alberta's pandemic response. As a result, regulated health professionals, including social workers, have been recruited to fill these interdisciplinary roles. Social workers have skills that support contact tracing and sharing supportive health information and have been sought out to perform these services. Further, while medical testing procedures are not activities within the scope of social work practice, there is nothing preventing social workers from performing these activities as well. If the task is not a restricted activity, and a social worker is sufficiently trained to safely and competently perform these tasks, social workers may take roles that include medical testing procedures.

WHICH COVID-19 MEDICAL SWAB TESTING ACTIVITIES ARE RESTRICTED?

Social Workers are not authorized to insert or remove instruments, devices, fingers or hands (1) beyond the point in the nasal passages where they normally narrow or (2) beyond the pharynx (*Government Organization Act, RSA 2000, Ch. G-10, s. 2(1)(b)(ii & iii)*).

Currently, most COVID-19 testing procedures (eg. throat or nasal swabbing) are not restricted activities and can be done safely and competently by trained social workers. However, nasopharyngeal (NP) swabbing is more specialized than swabbing of the throat and nostrils and this been identified as a restricted activity. Social workers **are not authorized** to perform nasopharyngeal (NP) swabbing.

It is the responsibility of social workers to engage in the relevant training directed by their employers and follow the policies relating to the medical testing procedures.

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL WORKERS IN OVERDOSE RESPONSE

Social workers play important roles responding to the opioid crisis and have the potential to be on the front line when an overdose emergency occurs. In Alberta, the administration of an injection is a restricted activity. Social workers are not authorized to perform this restricted activity and may not perform injections as part of their professional role.

Registered social workers who have completed the required training may do the following:

- Provide overdose prevention, recognition and response education and training to members of the public.
- Distribute overdose response kits to members of the public who are at risk of overdose or who may witness an overdose.

WHICH OVERDOSE RESPONSE ACTIVITIES ARE RESTRICTED?

Registered social workers may not:

- Inject Naloxone, UNLESS doing so clearly falls within the Emergency Exception:
 - i. there is no authorized individual available to do the injection;
 - ii. the Naloxone is provided in order to provide physical comfort or stabilize the individual who is ill, injured or unconscious as a result of an accident or other emergency; and
 - iii. no compensation is expected or received by the member.
- Be involved in the sale of Naloxone or receive compensation in relation to providing Naloxone.

The emergency injection of Naloxone by an RSW who is trained in opioid overdose response would not constitute unprofessional conduct. It is the responsibility of the RSW to follow their employer's policies regarding the distribution and use of overdose response kits in the work setting.

RELEVANT STANDARDS OF PRACTICE (2019)

E.4 Limits on Practice and Adding New Services and Techniques

- b. A social worker will limit their practice to areas in which the social worker has gained competence through education, training, or supervised experience.
- c. Where a social worker does not have sufficient knowledge/skill/ability to provide a service that is requested, the social worker will:
 - i. develop the competence to complete the task;
 - ii. decline to act; or
 - iii. obtain the client's consent to consult or collaborate with, or refer to, a social worker or another professional who is competent on that matter.
- d. A social worker, when developing competency in a professional service or technique that is either new to the social worker or new to the profession, will engage in ongoing consultation with other social workers or suitable professionals who are knowledgeable in the area and will seek appropriate education and training in the area.