



College of
Registered Nurses
of Manitoba

Placebos

Code of Ethics Application

Registered nurses may be asked to provide care to clients receiving placebo treatments. A placebo is “a substance or intervention believed to be inactive, but is administered by the health-care professional as if it was an active medication” (Asai & Kadooka, 2013). A placebo may also refer to a procedure such as surgery or acupuncture (Potter & Perry, 2013). As RNs must practice in accordance with the *Code of Ethics for Registered Nurses*, it is important to understand the ethical values involved in the use of placebos as treatments.

Purpose

The purpose of this document is to discuss when it is acceptable to use placebos and the ethical values involved in administering placebos.

Acceptable Use of Placebos in Practice

RNs may include the use of placebos in their practice when:

1. the capable client consents to receiving a placebo as part of a documented treatment plan; or
2. the client is aware they may receive a placebo as part of a research trial.

Ethical Values and Impact on Practice

Several core values in the *Code of Ethics* must be considered around the use of placebos:

Value A: Providing Safe, Compassionate, Competent and Ethical Care.

Registered nurses provide safe, compassionate, competent and ethical care.

RNs recognize that the focus of care is on the client. The client is also recognized as part of the care team. RNs advocate on behalf of clients who are unknowingly receiving placebos.

Value C: Promoting and Respecting Informed Decision-Making

Registered nurses recognize, respect and promote a person’s right to be informed and make decisions.

RNs respect and promote autonomy in clients and help them to express their health needs and values. They assist in helping the client obtain desired information and services so they can make informed decisions. The client must be involved in decisions regarding their care including the use of placebos.

Value D: Preserving Dignity

Registered nurses recognize and respect the intrinsic worth of each person.

RNs recognize and respect the inherent worth of each person and advocate for the respectful treatment of all persons.

A therapeutic relationship is based on mutual trust and respect. The competent client who is excluded from knowing they are receiving a placebo can experience a sense of loss of control and increased vulnerability. This may impact the nurse/client therapeutic relationship. The RN is in an ideal position to advocate for the rights of the client to be an active participant in their care and treatment. The primary responsibility for creating a trusting and respectful relationship rests with the care providers.

Value G: Being Accountable

Registered nurses are accountable for their actions and answerable for their practice.

RNs question client care that is in conflict with the ethical values outlined in the *Code of Ethics*. Disagreements among health-care providers about the treatment and care provided to a client should be clarified and resolved by the members of the health-care team so as not to compromise their relationship with the person receiving care. Many organizations have processes for discussion and resolution of such disagreements and conflicting opinions. If a process does not exist, RNs initiate action to gather all those involved to participate in resolution of the conflict (see *Code of Ethics for Registered Nurses* Appendix A). Frameworks for working through ethical issues may be found in the resources section.

Resolution

Resolutions to disagreements about the appropriate use of placebos involve a number of actions and participants. Responsibility for specific actions will be determined by the organization's policy or by the organization's leaders and may not require the participation of the RN in all of the steps.

Essential actions will include:

1. identifying and clarifying the problem, the ethical issues arising, and those involved;
2. implementing a process for resolution through reporting the situation to organizational leaders and participating in the process as required;
3. reviewing the factors that lead to the situation and initiating measures to prevent recurrence; and
4. informing the client of the violation and re-establishing a trusting and therapeutic relationship when a competent client is provided a placebo without consent.

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References

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Resources

Canadian Bioethics Society

- www.bioethics.ca

Canadian Nurses Association Publications

- *Code of Ethics for Registered Nurses*

Manitoba Provincial Health Ethics Network

- www.mb-phen.ca