



College of  
Registered Nurses  
of Manitoba

# Duty to Provide Care in a Disease Outbreak

## Question:

I am concerned that if a disease outbreak such as influenza becomes pandemic I will be asked to provide care to infected persons. I am afraid of becoming infected myself and concerned that I will infect my family. If a disease outbreak rises to the level of a pandemic I might need to care for family members as well. What are my professional obligations? In addition what are the professional obligations of the registered nurse as far as personally being immunized against the disease?

## Answer:

The response to this question is taken from the *Code of Ethics for Registered Nurses*. The *Code of Ethics* serves as a foundation for registered nurses' ethical practice. It specifies the values or ethical principles and the expectations and responsibilities of the profession.

The ethical value pertaining to this issue is value A: Providing Safe Compassionate Competent Care. The relevant responsibility statement in the *Code of Ethics* reads,

During a natural or human-made disaster, including a communicable disease outbreak, nurses have a duty to provide care using appropriate safety precautions.

The *Code of Ethics* provides further clarification of this statement and applications for the RN in Appendix D of the code.

RNs provide care to those in need, sometimes even placing their own personal safety and health at risk. However, there may be some circumstances where provision of such care would cause an unreasonable burden to an RN. In such cases it may be acceptable for an RN to withdraw from providing care or refuse to provide care. An unreasonable burden might be the result of a lack of resources to practice safely, unreasonable expectations or threats to personal well-being. These factors may compromise an RN's ability to meet the practice direction *Practice Expectations for RNs* including the ethical obligations of the profession.

RNs should refer to the *Code of Ethics* when they consider their professional role in a disease outbreak and their duty to provide care, and weigh that against competing obligations to their own health, to their family and friends. The RN should be clear about the steps they will take when the situation arises.

The RN needs to consider their area of practice during the disease outbreak/pandemic and the degree of risk. For example, certain areas such as outpatient clinics, ERs and ICUs might pose a greater risk than caring for otherwise healthy individuals in other settings. RNs will still need to provide care in all areas including those where the degree of infection is no greater than the risk to the general public. In addition, the RN must take into consideration their professional obligation to provide care when the employer has provided the approved protective equipment and information.

One means of protection for the nurse as well as the public is for the nurse to be personally immunized against the current disease if there is an immunization available. If the nurse has doubt in making the decision to be immunized they should use their professional judgment and consult their own health-care provider. The nurse should consult current evidence and heed public health advice and directives about immunization for the disease outbreak in weighing the risks to personal health against risks to the public. There might be individual situations where the personal risk to the RN outweighs the benefits of immunization. The *Code of Ethics* provides guidance here as well.

Criteria for the nurse to consider include whether the benefit of the intervention (immunization) outweighs the harm the nurse might incur and does not present more than an acceptable risk to the nurse.

There might be other means of reducing potential risks to the public the employer could suggest such as wearing protective equipment to protect the clients they come in contact with.

Factors that mitigate fear for RNs in providing care include:

- Knowing that they will receive timely and accurate information about the disease and its spread as well as updates about appropriate safety measures.
- Access to protective gear and equipment to provide care and ensure their own safety.
- Knowing that their facility or region has emergency response guidelines as well as a process for resolving conflicts regarding work exemptions. Clear communication from the employer regarding expectations during a disease outbreak is essential.
- Knowledge that there will be fair allocation of resources during a disease outbreak.
- Knowing that they will be supported with the burden of providing care – both the physical and moral burden of care.

**Published:** 06/2009

**Revised:** 05/2018

It should be noted that these factors demonstrate that the burden to provide care in a disease outbreak or pandemic does not belong solely to direct care providers such as RNs. Employers, the regional health administration and the government all have reciprocal obligations to mitigate fear and provide as safe a work environment as possible for RNs.

In the midst of a disaster, disease outbreak or pandemic all nurses in all roles and areas of practice have an ethical obligation to:

- Follow guidelines provided by government (Health Canada and Manitoba Health). These updates and guidelines can be found through links on the College's website.
- Make fair decisions about allocation of resources.
- Set priorities in as transparent a manner as possible.
- Provide safe competent and ethical care to the extent possible.
- Help determine if, when and how nurses can decline to provide care.
- Advocate for the least restrictive measures possible when an individual's rights must be restricted (isolation technique).

In anticipation of possible disasters or disease outbreaks, the College of Registered Nurses of Manitoba has a contingency plan to increase the number of RNs available to provide care. The College has the authority to develop a temporary registration status for RNs who might not be on the practicing register and provide a temporary certificate of practice under such special circumstances.

For more information please contact one of our practice and standards consultants at

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