

Registered Nurses and Baccalaureate Education

The knowledge, skills and personal attributes that today's health system demands of its registered nurses (RNs) can be gained only through broad-based baccalaureate nursing programs.

According to the Canadian Institute for Health Information, 62 per cent of registered nurses are diploma educated.¹ Their contribution is highly valued in Canada's workforce. The Canadian Nurses Association, however, supports strategies that encourage nurses to stay in the workforce, pursue continuing education and, for those who choose, work toward earning a baccalaureate degree.

Are patient outcomes positively affected by having baccalaureate-educated RNs?

Yes. Research shows that staffing with baccalaureate-educated RNs is associated with improved patient safety and positive patient outcomes. One study showed a five-per-cent decrease in the risk of patient death for every 10-per-cent increase in the proportion of hospital RNs holding degrees.² There have been similar findings for community-based health services; the health outcomes of people cared for by baccalaureate-educated RNs were significantly better.³ Better patient outcomes also mean cost savings for the health-care system.

How do baccalaureate-educated RNs improve access to health care?

They make the health-care system more efficient and thus more accessible. Baccalaureate-educated RNs have schooling that is in line with other health professionals, which facilitates teamwork. Baccalaureate programs create opportunities for interdisciplinary learning and common clinical practice experiences.

Why is a baccalaureate education important for RNs?

The skills and knowledge required to perform the complex, critical health-care tasks of a nurse are most effectively taught in a baccalaureate program. Canadians rely on RNs for support during life-and-death decisions and situations. They expect RNs to develop and implement multi-faceted plans for managing chronic disease, treating complex health conditions and assisting them in the transition from the hospital to the community. Canadians also look to RNs for health education and for strategies to improve their health. RNs assess the appropriateness of new research and technology for patients and adjust care plans accordingly.

Which provinces and territories require RNs to have a baccalaureate education?

All the provinces and territories, except Quebec and the Yukon, require RNs to have a baccalaureate education or are in the process of moving to such a requirement. [See chart for details.](#)

Is a baccalaureate education a requirement for RNs in other countries?

Yes. In Australia, Iceland, Ireland and New Zealand, RNs must have a baccalaureate degree to practise. Many other countries, including the United States and Germany, are working to establish baccalaureate education as an entry-to-practice requirement for RNs.

How long does it take to complete a baccalaureate nursing degree program?

Nursing degree programs can be completed in two to four years. Accelerated, condensed and advanced entry programs are in place in every province. A growing proportion of nursing students have already completed a degree in another discipline; many of these students access two-year baccalaureate nursing programs. The value of a baccalaureate education is confirmed by the fact that about one-third of all diploma-educated RNs eventually return to school to obtain a baccalaureate degree.

Do baccalaureate-educated RNs work with patients?

¹ Canadian Institute for Health Information. (2008). *Regulated Nurses: Trends, 2003-2007*. Table 13 - Registered Nursing Workforce, by Highest Education in Nursing, by Jurisdiction and Canada, 2003-2007. Available at http://secure.cihi.ca/cihiweb/dispPage.jsp?cw_page=PG_1710_E&cw_topic=1710&cw_rel=AR_2529_E

² Aiken, L. H., Clarke, S. P., Cheung, R. B., Sloane, D. M., & Silber, J. H. (2003). Educational levels of hospital nurses and surgical patient mortality. *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 290(12), 1617-1623.

³ O'Brien-Pallas, L., Doran, D. I., Murray, M., Cockerill, R., Sidani, S., Laurie-Shaw, B., & Lochhass-Gerlach, J. (2001). Evaluation of a client care delivery model, part 1: Variability in nursing utilization in community home nursing. *Nursing Economic\$, 19*(6), 267-276; (2002). Evaluation of a client care delivery model, part 2: Variability in client outcomes in community home nursing. *Nursing Economic\$, 20*(1), 13-21, 36.

Yes. According to the Canadian Institute for Health Information, 81 per cent of RNs with a baccalaureate degree work in direct care.⁴

⁴ Canadian Institute for Health Information. (2007). *List of data tables (Workforce trends of regulated nurses in Canada, 2006)*. Table D.RN.6 – RN workforce by area of responsibility, highest education in nursing and province/territory of registration, Canada, 2006. Available at http://secure.cihi.ca/cihiweb/dispPage.jsp?cw_page=statistics_nursing_2006_e

Entry to practice education requirements for registered nurses

This table illustrates how the provinces and territories have implemented the transition from diploma entry level to baccalaureate entry level for registered nurses.	
Jurisdiction	Target year and status
Atlantic provinces (Prince Edward Island, Newfoundland and Labrador, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia)	1998 completed
Saskatchewan	2000 completed
Ontario	2005 completed
British Columbia	2006 completed
Manitoba	2005 in progress: A few diploma programs remain in Manitoba
Alberta	2009 in progress: Alberta converted to a degree program with diploma exit for some students and has proposed that the transition to baccalaureate as entry to practice be completed by the end of December 2009.
Northwest Territories and Nunavut	2010 in progress: The Northwest Territories and Nunavut will complete the transition to baccalaureate as entry to practice by 2010.
Quebec	Quebec continues to offer diploma programs while supporting the development of baccalaureate partnerships between Collèges d'enseignement général et professionnel (CEGEP) and universities.
Yukon	The Yukon has no entry-level educational programs.

The Canadian Nurses Association, Public Policy Department, June 2009