COLLEGE OF
LICENSED PRACTICAL NURSES
OF ALBERTA

Practice Guideline

Mobile Devices

Revised: January 8, 2020

This document is linked to legislation:

Health Professions Act
Personal Information Protection Act

This document is linked to other documents that direct expectations of professional behaviour or requirements for practice:

Standards of Practice
Code of Ethics
Standards of Practice on Boundary Violations

This document is linked to related supportive documents:

Confidentiality
Professionalism on Social Media
Independent Practice (Self-Employed Practice)

REVISIONS and UPDATES

Editorial Update January 2020

***Practice Guideline**: The legislative mandate of the College of Licensed Practical Nurses of Alberta (CLPNA) is to serve and protect the public by ensuring its members deliver safe, competent and ethical nursing care. A Practice Guideline is an evidence informed document designed to assist membership with making decisions about appropriate practices. These documents support professional judgment and permit flexibility in practice.*

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St. Albert Trail Place
13163 -146 Street
Edmonton, AB T5L 4S8

Phone 780.484.8886
Toll Free 1.800.661.5877
Fax 780.484.9069
www.clpna.com

INTRODUCTION An increasing number of nurses are using mobile devices to store information or to communicate with colleagues, other healthcare providers, and clients.[1] While mobile devices offer convenience and flexibility for healthcare professionals to manage information, there is also an increased risk in the unauthorized disclosure of a client's personal health information (PHI) especially with the ease of accessing social media. Licensed practical nurses (LPNs) have a legal and ethical obligation to protect the privacy and confidentiality of clients' PHI, which is referenced in relevant privacy legislation, the *Standards of Practice*, the *Code of Ethics* and the College of Licensed Practical Nurses of Alberta's (CLPNA) document on "Confidentiality."[2]

PURPOSE This practice guideline supports LPNs in the responsible use of mobile devices. It can be read in conjunction with CLPNA's existing document on "Professionalism on Social Media."[3] This practice guideline also outlines strategies that LPNs can follow to safeguard PHI that may be contained in mobile devices.

DISCUSSION OF EVIDENCE With rapidly changing technology, the use of mobile devices and online applications is becoming more common in healthcare. Based on a 2014 CLPNA Communications Survey, 18% of LPNS in Alberta are expected by their employer to use mobile devices in their work, and this number is expected to grow.[4]

What are mobile devices?

Mobile devices are portable computing equipment with functions to access, store, process, and transfer information.[5] Laptops, tablets, or smartphones are just a few examples of mobile devices that allow healthcare professionals to communicate with each other and with clients by telephone, text message, or email. Mobile devices may also be portable storage devices such as USB flash drives, hard drives, and CDs/DVDs.[6] While these devices have fewer functions compared to portable computing devices, their small size and portability may lead to similar privacy risks.[7]

What are the benefits?

There are benefits to using mobile devices in a healthcare work environment. The enhanced communication between healthcare professionals may contribute to better patient safety and quality of care.[8] In a 2014 Finland study that surveyed nurses on their experiences in the use of electronic communication, the authors found that electronic/mobile devices were used in the following ways:[9]

- Nursing activities (e.g. sharing photographs of clients' conditions with doctors for consultations and informing clients of their appointments).
- Sharing of information between colleagues to support and develop their own nursing knowledge and competencies (e.g. of education handouts and scholarly literature).
- Organizing daily operations (e.g. ordering supportive services like meals for clients).
- Organizing administrative tasks (e.g. making appointments for meetings and sharing of minutes).
- Leisure (e.g. using social media to share personal messages).

If used appropriately and responsibly, the use of mobile devices by nurses in the workplace can be advantageous for themselves, other healthcare professionals, and clients.

What are the risks?

If nurses use mobile devices at work inappropriately, they may be at risk of breaching their responsibilities under privacy legislation. While the specific privacy legislation applicable in a given situation will depend on the LPN's work setting in Alberta, the guiding principles of maintaining the privacy and confidentiality of a client's PHI are similar. The *Health Information Act* will likely apply to LPNs working for a healthcare organization (e.g. Alberta Health Services), whereas the *Personal Information Protection Act* will likely apply to LPNs in independent practice.[10]

Additionally, if consent is not obtained appropriately LPNs may also be at risk of breaching their responsibilities under privacy legislation. For example, while the sharing photographs of clients'

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conditions with other healthcare professionals has been found to be beneficial in some circumstances (see above section), consent must always be obtained.[11] Please note that implied consent is not sufficient for taking or sharing photographs. LPNs need to be aware of employer policies when wanting to take photographs of clients for work purposes. All LPNs whether they are employed or in independent practice should follow appropriate consent procedures and have documented consent before any photographs are taken and/or shared.

The use of mobile devices for employment purposes creates a risk for the unauthorized disclosure of PHI due to security breaches, theft, or loss. Consider the following cases of privacy breaches in Canada involving nurses:[12]

- A nurse lost an unencrypted USB key that contained PHI of approximately 83 500 patients who had been immunized for H1N1. This led to an investigation by the Information and Privacy Commissioner of Ontario (IPC) and a class action lawsuit.
- A nurse working in a hospital had her laptop stolen from her car. The laptop contained records of 20 000 patients. It was not encrypted despite hospital policy. This also led to an investigation of the situation by the IPC.

These cases highlight the importance of implementing safeguards for data protection.

There is also evidence that mobile devices used in healthcare settings are susceptible to high bacteria/viral contamination (e.g. MRSA, influenza).[13] Infection prevention and control measures should be taken to safeguard against the risk of transmission of infection.

INFORMED PRACTICE

Responsible use of mobile devices, whether personal or employer provided, is the best safeguard against risks. Research has shown that the following strategies are recommended to protect clients' PHI contained in mobile devices:[14]

- Avoid leaving your mobile devices unattended or have unattended mobile devices secured in locked locations (e.g. cabinets) to prevent theft/loss of device.
- Have a strong password for authentication/access on your mobile device.
- Do not use the auto login function on your mobile devices.
- Have proper antivirus software protection on your mobile devices.
- Enable the encryption function on your mobile device to reduce the risk of PHI being hacked or otherwise accessed.
- Have security measures (e.g. antivirus software) when sending or receiving PHI, especially over public Wi-Fi networks.
- Use a locking mechanism on your mobile device(s).
- Enable the auto time-out feature on your mobile device when device is not in use.
- Delete all stored PHI on mobile devices before discarding or replacing them.

Below are some strategies LPNs can use to prevent the spread of bacteria/viruses on mobile devices to protect themselves, colleagues, and clients from possible cross-contamination and infection:[15]

- Disinfect the surfaces of mobile devices with either 70% isopropyl alcohol wipes or ethyl alcohol wipes
- Practice proper hand hygiene and wash your hands before and after contact with a client
- Avoid placing your mobile devices down on any high traffic/patient contact surfaces

Employers typically have policies and procedures in place that LPNs must follow, especially if they encourage mobile device use at work.[16] LPNs in independent practice should consider implementing administrative, physical, and technical safeguards to prevent a privacy breach and to protect clients' PHI (see the CLPNA document "Independent Practice for the Licensed Practical Nurse" for more information).

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As social media is accessible on mobile devices, responsible use of social media is also important (see the CLPNA document "Professionalism on Social Media" for more information).

CONCLUSION

Inappropriate use of mobile devices may lead to disciplinary action. If after reading this document you have questions about the appropriate use of mobile devices, please contact the Practice Team at the CLPNA via practice@clpna.com, 780-484-8886 or 1-800-661-5877 (toll free in Alberta).

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Edmonton, AB T5L 4S8

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Fax 780.484.9069
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