Public Health Nursing & COVID-19 Vaccine Delivery

April 2021

Background

Public health nurses are a highly specialized group of nursing professionals who undergo extensive education and focus broadly on disease prevention and the promotion of community health and safety. They work in education, prevention, advocacy, assessment and evaluation of public health initiatives, including immunization programs. Public health nurses share science and evidence-based information with diverse populations throughout the province in a way that is easily understood and supports informed consent. Public health nurses are also well versed in epidemiology, population level health interventions, and population health data collection, analysis, and reporting.

During COVID-19 we have heard about the role of public health nurses as contract tracers, doing the important investigative work of understanding how COVID-19 spreads in our communities and preventing further spread by contacting and supporting those who may have been exposed to the disease. According to an article published in the Tyee entitled "*To Soothe Vaccine Hesitancy, Tap Into the Expertise of Nurses*", authors Claire Pitcher and Michelle Danda note: "Unlike medicine, nursing as a discipline is not focused on cure or control; rather, it is concentrated on helping people navigate through everyday health issues within a particular context." [i] It is precisely this level of care that affords public health nurses the skills and expertise to help inform the public of nuanced and often complex scientific evidence, drive understanding of this evidence, as well as implement and advocate for informed choices in immunization.

Nursing has a well-established history at the forefront of immunization and immunization advocacy. Indeed, nursing is identified in Canada's National Immunization Strategy as not only critical contributors to vaccine access enabling immunization coverage goals but also as provincial level partners in immunization program planning, monitors in the national Active Surveillance System, and the largest workforce supporting public and patient education on immunization[ii]. Nurses are front line workers, immunization and public health researchers, public health and social policy leaders, and recognized experts in immunization care planning for diverse and vulnerable populations.

Each day, public health nurses carry out COVID-19 testing, contact tracing, regular immunization schedules for both infants and adults all across our province as well as COVID-19 immunizations. This work supports public uptake of immunization schedules for diseases such as polio, hepatitis and influenza, as well as COVID-19 case identification, immunization and contact tracing. These are critical activities that keep our acute care system available for COVID-19 response and ensure our communities stay as healthy as possible. It is also critical work in helping the public to understand the importance of and the benefits of COVID-19 vaccines through patient-centred practices that centre informed consent, personal autonomy, and population health promotion.

Despite decades of public health nursing leadership in immunization campaign planning and delivery and the specialized knowledge of public health nursing on immunization and public health promotion, public health nursing remains absent from key decision-making tables during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, we have yet to see public health nursing fully enabled in COVID-19 vaccine planning or strategic level decision making. We continue to see public health nurses used as bodies to get needles into arms, rather than the skilled leaders in immunization and public health that they are.

In addition to the lack of inclusion of public health nursing as leaders in immunization, workforce mobilization for the COVID-19 vaccine continues to be developed without the expertise of public health nurses and nursing leaders. The consequences of this omission is significant delays in staffing immunization clinics across the province, a lack of coordination between high level planning and vaccine delivery on the ground, and delays in immunization administration to those most vulnerable. Nursing knows what is required to ensure every citizen who wants a vaccine receives a vaccine but emergency response decision making structures do not include nurses, do not support nursing leadership, and consistently communicate to public health nursing that we are a workforce to be directed rather than experts who lead.

NNPBC applauds the recent public health order that expanded the group of health care providers able to give immunizations (pending training and in some cases under the supervision of nurses). This increased pool of available providers will be beneficial in ensuring that the COVID-19 vaccine roll-out flows smoothly and efficiently. As the largest group of care providers in our health care system and as established health leaders, nurses are the foundation of public health response in British Columbia. However, the nursing contribution goes beyond usefulness and mere strength in numbers. Nurses have consistently been identified as the most trusted health profession in our country and it is trust that leads to greater compliance in vaccine uptake, reliable implementation of immunization campaigns, and rapid workforce response. Coupled with expertise, public health nurses are a largely untapped resources that are primed to help take on the challenges of COVID-19 vaccine roll-out in our large and diverse province.

Key Messages

- Public health nurses are a highly trusted, educated and specialized group of nurses who promote health and focus on disease prevention in the community.

- Public health nurses have the experience and expertise not only in working with diverse populations but in ensuring that complex scientific information is made clear to the public.

- Nurses, and in particular public health nurses, have been and continue to be at the forefront of immunization and immunization advocacy. Our expertise in this area is the consequences of over a century of specialized leadership development in public health and population level health care interventions.

- Evidence states that trust is the key driver of vaccine compliance. As the most trusted group of care providers in Canada, nurses are uniquely positioned to build the trusting relationships that are the foundation of vaccine uptake and population level protection.

- In spite of their expertise, public health nurses are consistently absent from decision making tables and have not been optimally included in the COVID-19 immunization campaign strategic and delivery planning.

- NNPBC knows that public health nurses are leaders and experts in immunization and public health. To optimize the public health response to COVID-19, governments must recognize the value of public health nursing and call upon public health nurses to not only administer immunizations but to lead the design, delivery, and decision making of the COVID-19 immunization campaign

- NNPBC supports collaboration and consultation with amongst all nursing designations and with other health providers to ensure the 'voices' of nurses and health professionals are clearly heard in matters of health and public policy.

Further Reading/Resources

- The Tyee: "To Soothe Vaccine Hesitancy, Tap into the Expertise of Nurses" by Claire Pitcher and Michelle Danda

- NNPBC Issues Summary: Immunizations and COVID-19

- NNPBC COVID-19 Resources

- NNPBC Blog: Tackling Vaccine Hesitance- A Nursing Approach

- BCCDC and BC Government Vaccinations and COVID-19

- WHO- Immunization in the Context of COVID-19

- WHO Draft Landscape of COVID-19 Vaccinations

- [Immunize BC- Immunizations During COVID-19](#)
- [Public Health Agency of Canada- Immunizations During COVID-19](#)
- [Canada's National Immunization Strategy](#)

Please feel free to direct questions and additional comments to [info@nnpbc.com.](mailto:info@nnpbc.com)

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[i] [The Tyee: "To Soothe Vaccine Hesitancy, Tap into the Expertise of Nurses" by Claire Pitcher and Michelle Danda](#)

[ii] Advisory Committee on Population Health and Health Security (ACPHHS). (2003). *National immunization strategy (NIS): Final report 2003*. Retrieved from https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/phac-aspc/migration/phac-aspc/publicat/nis-sni-03/pdf/nat_imm_strat_e.pdf