



Nursing Advocacy and COVID-19

A critical aspect of high-quality, patient-centred care is advocacy. Advocacy means nurses advocate for and on behalf of patients and families by ensuring that they make informed decisions regarding their health, by helping them navigate an increasingly complex health care system, ensuring that complex terminology is easily understood and by helping patients and families make ethical decisions related to care. It is precisely because nurses have the most direct interaction with patients and families that they are well-positioned to be advocates. Additionally, nurses are leaders in their communities, can bring health related issues to community forums, have earned the public trust and serve as highly credible sources of information.

In a health crisis, such as a pandemic, the ways advocacy is realized is even more critical because nurses are at the forefront of at all points of healthcare delivery: mitigation, preparedness, response and recovery. What nurses say matters to the public and, as arbiters of the public trust, it is imperative that what is said is accurate and upholds the highest standards of nursing ethics.

Nurses work under a robust code of ethics and professional standards set by the BC College of Nurses and Midwives (BCCNM).

Each designation has its own professional standards, which include ethics

- [RN-NP \(Standard 4](#) relates to ethical practice)
- [LPN \(Standard 4](#) relates to ethical practice)
- [RPN](#) and they have a separate [code of ethics](#)

Noted below are tips, tricks and ideas that nurses can use to advocate constructively particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic.

1) Key Messages. A key message is a great way to deliver a consistent set of short messages that speak to the issues that matter most to you. A good key message is relatively short and is not open for misinterpretation. If there are specific issues related to COVID-19 you want political and healthcare leaders to hear, write a series of key messages and ask yourself if you were to have ten seconds with that person, would they be clear about what it is your issue is. The best thing you can do is pick one or two issues that matter to you or that impact you personally as a nurse.

A well-defined message has two key components. First as noted, it is simple, direct, and concise. Second, it defines the issues on your own terms and in your own words. Your message will be much more meaningful if you express it in your own words with all of your opinion, frustration, joy or anger included.

2) Getting the Attention of Policy Makers and Health Leaders. The challenge for many of us is how to be included and invited to share your opinion with those who can best affect change.

Nevertheless, there are certainly ways to become involved, and become the type of person whose presence and opinion is valued. During a health crisis, political and health leaders hear from a lot of people. Some of them come with concerns about injustices or problems others come forward with solutions and suggestions that are well thought out and considered. It's not a surprise who the preferred person is in this situation. No question most of us would rather listen to the individual who comes with a plan and ideas.

Connect with health and political leaders. They have offices, office staff, social media accounts etc. Make a point of talking to them. Don't consume their time. Share your well-thought out ideas and opinions and move on. Plan your questions and key messages, introduce yourself, pass them your (virtual) card and engage in a short conversation with them.



3) Asking Relevant Questions. We have some suggestions that can help you to ask questions that are relevant and important.

- a. Think about the health policy issues that are affecting your work, your safety, your well-being and ask sort of questions you feel health and political leaders should be answering.
- b. Split the questions up among colleagues - only one question per person.
- c. Keep your question short and succinct. Stay away from questions that can be 'yes or no' answers, but don't ask complicated, compound questions.
- d. Focus on asking open questions like "What do you think about...?" or "How do you feel about...?" Or "How would you handle this process?" or "How would you implement the steps you discussed?"

4) A Word About Petitions. In the era of online petitions and GoFundMe accounts it's easy to focus on using these avenues to make a point or to ask for change. The reality, however, is that rarely, if ever, things change because people have signed a petition. That is not to say they always fail but that politicians may be inclined take up a petitioned cause only if it's easy and something they might agree with anyway. For example, online petitioners claimed that their petition led to the banning of plastic bags in Victoria, BC. The truth is though this was well-underway and an 'easy' win, meaning that the petition was not the reason for the change. If you love petitions, please go ahead and use them but there are other more constructive ways to ensure that your important issues become part of the public dialogue. And there are times that petitions can actually damage your cause, because they create a sense of 'ganging up' against an individual rather than advocating in favour of a position.

5) Using Social Media Platforms. Most organizations, political leaders, health care leaders and people in general are using at least one social media platform, and most of us use multiple platforms. Follow these leaders and organizations. Check out what they say. Respond to a tweet or a Facebook post, share it, retweet it, like it. Or, use it as a space to ask that person questions. Respond to them using some of the tips above with respect to key messages. Ask them focused questions and engage them. Keep in mind though that for many people social media is a tool to 'needle' or criticize in large part because you get to be anonymous and hide behind a computer. Don't fall for this idea that all social media interactions should be contentious or fraught in order to be effective. Social media is a powerful tool that is about engagement, a way to make connections and build bridges and as opposed to tearing them down. Don't shy away but be constructive.

When using social media, always remember you must follow BCCNM standards, including the Privacy and Confidentiality Practice Standard.

It's worth noting that we have all seen by now some of the online videos posted by nurses at their worksites around the COVID pandemic. In some cases, nurses are highlighting difficult working conditions, areas for concern, or are sharing their very valid fears etc. We would never tell anyone to not do something they feel strongly about (assuming it fit within the parameters of the BCCNP standards). We do ask though that you consider the audience for these videos. Is it for a political leader? A manager at work? The public in general? With that in mind we always ask that nurses keep the most critical piece in mind: you are trusted by the public, what you say resonates and matters so take the opportunity to be constructive and solutions oriented.

And if you are identifying yourself as a professional nurse in BC in your social media profile, then you are expected to adhere to your professional standards.

6) Understand Partisan, Non-Partisan, Bi-Partisan and understand when NOT to be partisan:

NNPBC is a non-partisan organization. Non-partisan is defined as "objective" or not being controlled or unduly influenced by a political party or special interest group. In other words, we have no particular bias towards any political party and do not endorse or support one political party. Instead, we are interested in talking to and hearing all perspectives on issues that impact nursing and working towards a solutions-oriented approach.

On the flip side, sometimes organizations (or individuals) are partisan, which is defined as something that is partial to a particular person, party or outcome. There's nothing wrong with this, and many nurses have very good reason to be partisan -- perhaps they tend to have conservative or liberal views or feel particularly strongly about one party or another. NNPBC welcomes the involvement of nurses who have a partisan viewpoint -- but just note that we won't publish or support anything overly partisan. To represent nursing effectively in the province, we need to be able to work with governments across the political spectrum and to maintain constructive relationships with decision makers.

Ironically, the third term, bi-partisan, is probably the most problematic, and maybe most frequently used term of the three. Technically, bi-partisan is defined as 'composed of members from both parties'.

As a non-partisan organization, NNPBC welcomes all nurses to bring issues to the forefront, particularly during times of public health crisis. In most instances, taking a partisan position is not helpful, and could potentially be harmful to the profession's capacity for influence as a shaper of public and health policy. If you as an individual wish to take a position on anything a political leader or party shares or notes during a crisis such as this, ask yourself if your politics will help or hurt the situation? It's ok to be critical of the decisions or actions of political leaders, but unprofessional to attack them personally.

You may want to express your outrage on behalf of populations not being well served by current policies but be sure you come to the table with a solution for the issue with which you are being critical. In a time of crisis such as this, when our political leaders from all parties are working together and putting aside politics for the greater good, party politics will not reflect the urgency of the situation.

And finally...

We hope that these guidelines will encourage, rather than discourage you from the important advocacy role that nursing plays within society. Many of the social justice issues that arise in the health domain have been triggered by strong professional advocacy from a nursing perspective. We have the public trust – let's use it in a manner that is not self serving but enacted in a professional manner to serve the public, including the sectors of society least able to advocate on behalf of themselves!