

# Championing Specialty Nursing Certification: A Call to Action for Canadian Nurse Executives

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## Introduction

As the Canadian healthcare system faces rising complexity, workforce shortages and growing demands for quality and efficiency, the role of nurses has become increasingly critical. Historically trained as generalists, today's nurses are often thrust into highly specialized roles without the formal training or recognition to match the complexity of their practice. The prevailing perception – “a nurse is a nurse” – undermines recognition of the diverse roles and competencies within the profession. Specialty nursing certification, while proven to improve outcomes, remains underutilized and undervalued in Canada. For the healthcare system to thrive, nurse executives across all sectors must become vocal champions of specialty nursing certification. Doing so is not only a professional imperative but also a strategic necessity for optimizing patient outcomes, ensuring workforce sustainability and achieving better value.

## The Case for Specialty Nursing Certification

Specialty nursing certification (certification<sup>1</sup>) is a formal, post-licensure validation of enhanced knowledge, skills and competencies in a specific area of nursing practice. Since 1992, the Canadian Nurses Association (CNA) has offered specialty practice credentials for regulated nurses, including certification in critical care, oncology, gerontology and community health. These credentials are backed by evidence demonstrating that certified nurses deliver better care: they detect complications earlier, make more accurate clinical decisions and improve patient safety and satisfaction (CNA 2025). Today's CNA Certification Program comprises 23 nursing practice specialties. It's important to distinguish certification from advanced practice nurse (APN) roles, such as the Nurse Practitioner or Clinical Nurse Specialist, which require graduate-level education and prepare nurses for a wider range of clinical and APN responsibilities.

Certification also brings systemic benefits. Organizations that support specialty certification report lower staff turnover, higher retention of experienced nurses, reduced lengths of stay and improved access to care (Getselman and Ma 2022; Griffis et al. 2023; Halm 2021; Whitehead et al. 2019). Yet, despite these known benefits, certification rates have dropped in Canada by 31.8% in one decade – from 17,947 CNA-certified nurses in 2015 to just over 12,241 CNA-certified nurses in 2025. This downward trend signals a missed opportunity for health-care transformation.

### **Transition Between Education and Practice**

Most Canadian nursing education programs still focus on producing generalist graduates. While this model was effective in the past, it does not prepare new graduate nurses or early career nurses for the current realities of healthcare delivery. Nurses now graduate and immediately transition into highly specialized roles – intensive care, oncology, emergency and mental health – without adequate specialty preparation. Undergraduate programs cannot embed comprehensive training for every specialty, leaving new nurses reliant on informal, inconsistent on-the-job learning.

Moreover, there is no national framework to ensure equitable access to specialty education across provinces and territories. The lack of accredited post-licensure specialty training and standardized recognition mechanisms contributes to inconsistent care and poor retention, particularly among graduate nurses, and limits nurses' ability to demonstrate their competencies or grow professionally. With over 90% of nurses working in direct care or service settings (CIHI 2024), nurse executives play a pivotal role in shaping the profession's future and ensuring nursing expertise is rewarded and highly valued.

### **Certification as a Driver of Quality and Value**

Nursing specialty certification validates a nurse's expertise in a defined area of practice. It ensures that nurses are competent in delivering care aligned with best practices, thereby improving patient safety and health outcomes. Certified nurses are associated with:

- lower hospital-acquired complications;
- better detection of worsening systems or deterioration;
- improved patient and family satisfaction;
- reduced length of hospital stays;
- lower mortality rates.

Furthermore, organizations that support and promote certification report improved nurse retention, increased professional satisfaction and decreased

turnover (Edwin 2023; Griffis et al. 2023). Supporting certification also sends a strong message to patients and the public: that the organization values high standards, safety and specialized knowledge. In a climate of rising patient acuity and public scrutiny, this can become a powerful differentiator. These gains are not merely theoretical – they are financially measurable and operationally significant.

### **Specialty Certification and Health Workforce Retention**

Canada faces well-documented nursing retention issues, exacerbated by high attrition rates among early-career nurses (Faubert 2024). Research indicates that nurses are more likely to stay in organizations that invest in their professional development and recognize their expertise (Getselman and Ma 2022; Whitehead et al. 2019). Certification is identified as a strategy within the Nursing Retention Toolkit under the core theme, *Inspired Leadership*, for the initiative focused on identifying and supporting emerging leaders (Health Canada 2024).

Certification also supports workforce planning. It enables nurse managers to identify and deploy staff with verified competencies, improving unit staffing efficiency and reducing reliance on costly agency nurses or crisis hires. Certification enhances job satisfaction and gives nurses a sense of purpose and identity within their practice. It creates career pathways that encourage growth, mitigate burnout and foster long-term engagement. Employers that sponsor certification programs and provide structured pathways to specialization report significantly lower turnover. In fact, units led by certified nurse leaders often have a higher proportion of certified staff – creating a ripple effect that drives excellence across teams (Whitehead et al. 2019). For nurse executives, promoting certification is not just an ethical decision – it is a sound workforce investment.

### **Nurse Executives: The Essential Advocates**

Nurse executives are uniquely positioned to reverse these trends. As strategic leaders and stewards of clinical excellence, they must advocate for systemic support of specialty nursing certification at every level – within their organizations, through policy engagement and in collaboration with regulatory and academic partners (Grdisa 2025). Nurse executives can:

1. *Promote a culture of recognition*: Nurses who earn specialty credentials should be celebrated. Recognition strategies such as credential identifiers (e.g., badge, pin or symbol), public acknowledgment and annual celebrations will motivate others to pursue certification and reinforce the value of expertise within teams.
2. *Invest in preparation and access*: Executives can allocate funding and resources for in-house review courses, study materials, exam fee coverage and flexible scheduling. These measures address common barriers such as cost, time and test anxiety (Stanzo et al. 2024).

3. *Integrate certification into workforce planning:* Specialty nursing certification should inform hiring practices, job descriptions and staffing decisions. Including certified nurses in care models enhances safety, reduces risk and builds a pipeline of clinical leaders.
4. *Engage in policy advocacy:* Nurse executives are well-positioned to partner with the CNA and other national bodies to advocate for federal and provincial policies that protect and enhance the role of specialized nurses. This includes pay equity, credential recognition and the creation of standardized specialty pathways.

### **Addressing Barriers to Certification**

Despite the benefits, Canada lacks a coordinated national strategy to advance specialty nursing certification. In contrast to other health professions (e.g., physiotherapy, medicine), where specialization is institutionalized, nurses often receive no formal recognition, financial reward or professional advancement for becoming certified. Without systemic incentives, nurses are left to shoulder the cost, effort and risk of certification on their own. Nurses report the following challenges they face in pursuing certification:

- *Lack of awareness* about the value and availability of certification;
- *Lack of a comprehensive range of certification credentials* for nurse practitioners (NPs) and licensed/registered practical nurses (LPNs or RPNs);
- *Cost of exams and preparation materials;*
- *Inadequate organizational support;*
- *Minimal financial incentives* – certified nurses are often paid the same as non-certified peers;
- *Limited access* to formal specialty education, especially in rural areas.

A strategic approach is needed to dismantle these barriers. Nurse executives can lead this effort by lobbying for employer-sponsored certification, partnering with educational institutions and nursing associations to co-develop accessible specialty programs, identifying gaps in certification credentials for different categories of nurses (e.g., LPN or NP) and standardizing specialty preparation opportunities across settings.

### **Aligning Certification With Health System Needs**

Nurse executives must work collaboratively with federal and provincial governments, regulators, CNA and unions to overcome these barriers. Advocacy efforts should focus on:

- embedding specialty certification in collective agreements;
- recognizing specialty roles with differentiated job descriptions and pay structures;

- funding certification as part of professional development plans;
- supporting CNA's national task force and pilot initiatives targeting priority specialty areas.

Without policy-level action, certification risks becoming a privilege of a few rather than a scalable strategy for national health system improvement – particularly in high-demand specialties such as medical-surgical, emergency and community health nursing. These are direct care areas where patient volume, complexity and acuity are high. Yet paradoxically, these same areas are among the lowest in certification rates.

### **Valuing Specialized Nursing Roles**

One of the most pressing issues is the widespread lack of recognition for specialized nurses. In most clinical settings and union agreements, a “nurse is a nurse,” regardless of their expertise. This erodes professional identity, diminishes professional practice and advanced certification or credentialing, reduces motivation for professional development and leads to role ambiguity in interprofessional teams.

Specialized nursing practice – for registered nurses, LPNs, RPNs, clinical nurse specialists and NPs – must be recognized as distinct contributors within the nursing workforce. Policies should differentiate their roles, protect their job titles and ensure equitable pay for specialized knowledge and responsibilities. Nurse executives must work with unions, policy makers and healthcare administrators to embed this recognition into collective agreements and staffing models. As professionals, do we believe that pre-licensure education, qualifications, continuing education, advanced degrees, certification or credentials matter? Or does our identity stop with our entry-to-practice education qualification – contributing to the “nurse is a nurse” perception.

### **Advancing Equity and Elevating Public Understanding**

The current lack of public and professional understanding about nursing specialization hinders progress. Unlike physicians, whose specializations are well understood and valued, nurses with advanced knowledge and skills are often invisible in the system. Public-facing campaigns, such as “In the Life of a Certified Nurse,” supported by CNA, can shift perceptions and elevate nursing specialization in the public eye.

At the same time, care must be taken to ensure equity across rural and urban settings. Certification opportunities, support and employer incentives must be accessible to all nurses, regardless of geographic location, to prevent workforce

migration and care imbalances. The CNA has been engaged with several regions across the nation, and several initiatives are underway. For example, the British Columbia health authorities are developing specialized education programs that align with the various categories of specialty nursing certification as a nursing retention strategy. This initiative is critical and will help nurses to prepare and confidently demonstrate their knowledge and expertise by successfully passing national certification exams and achieving new credentials.

In addition to the health authority-led programs, there are numerous courses offered by healthcare organizations, academic institutions and the private sector across Canada that align with CNA certification competencies and support exam readiness. The CNA is encouraged to see a growing number of healthcare organizations with collective agreements, particularly in Eastern provinces, that are providing financial support to their nurses for pursuing certification. The CNA now offers an efficient and user-friendly voucher program that enables organizations to secure exam seats directly for their nursing staff.

### **Toward a National Strategy**

The CNA-led Specialty Nursing Practice Action Council and Canadian Network of Nursing Specialties both recommended a pilot project to prioritize certification for patient populations and demonstrate the value proposition of certification with Canada's current context. This initiative would be supported by a dedicated team with funding for public and social media campaigns, starting with a jurisdictional scan, intending to demonstrate the link between certification and measurable improvements in care delivery, retention and system costs. The CNA's leadership in developing a national strategy – including a task force, environmental scans and advocacy tools – is essential. This strategy must prioritize:

- recognition of specialized nursing roles in clinical, educational and regulatory environments;
- sustainable certification models (e.g., portfolio-based assessments);
- investments in specialty education pathways;
- certification for all categories of regulated nurses;
- employer partnerships and academic collaboration;
- continued research into certification's impact on care outcomes and costs.

This national effort must be driven by those in positions of influence – particularly, nurse executives, who can bridge the gap between direct care nursing practice and high-level system design.

## Conclusion

Canadian nurse executives have both the responsibility and the power to elevate specialty nursing certification from an optional credential to a cornerstone of high-quality, equitable healthcare. By championing specialty practice, advocating for systemic support and embedding certification into organizational culture, executives can unleash the full value of Canada's nursing workforce. The outcome? Better care, stronger teams, improved patient outcomes and a more resilient, sustainable health system.

It is time to stop seeing specialty certification as a “nice-to-have” and start recognizing it as a *must-have* for Canada's future.

Contact [certification@cna-aiic.ca](mailto:certification@cna-aiic.ca) to learn more about the efficient and user-friendly voucher program and begin the process (identify the number of certifications, pay one invoice and receive a voucher code to distribute to staff).

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