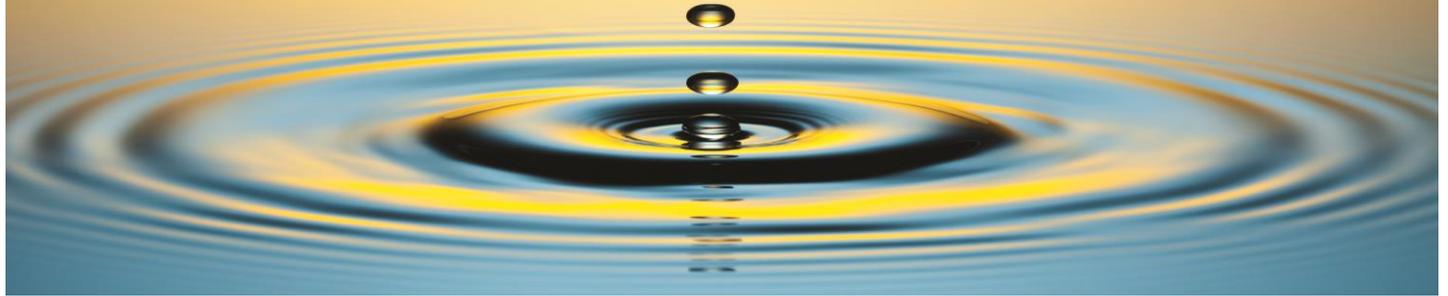


Practice Matters



Practice Matters was created as an educational resource for social workers in Newfoundland and Labrador. It is intended that this resource will generate ethical dialogue and enhance critical thinking on issues that impact social work practice. Practice Matters is provided for general information.

Professionalism and Regulation: Exploring the Link

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The term *professionalism* is used in a multitude of contexts and can be associated with a variety of meanings. The associated term *professional* is used to describe education, knowledge, judgment, skills and practice. The Social Work Dictionary (6th edition) offers the following definitions:

Professionalism: the degree to which an individual possesses and uses the knowledge, skills and qualifications of a profession and adheres to its values and ethics when serving the client.

Professional: an individual who qualifies for membership in a specific profession and uses its practices, knowledge and skills to provide services and in so doing always adheres to its values and code of ethics.

Three defining elements of social work *regulation* in Newfoundland and Labrador are:

- 1) Identifying through legislation that individuals who use the title *social worker* and/or practice within the scope of the profession possess the required qualifications. (a complete listing of individuals who are entitled to refer to themselves as a *social worker* and practice the profession can be found at <http://www.nlasw.ca/membersearch>)
- 2) Establishing a commitment to life-long learning as demonstrated through continuing professional education requirements (<http://www.nlasw.ca/continuing-education/cpe-policy>)
- 3) Declaring commitment to adhere to the values and code of ethics of the profession (https://casw-acts.ca/sites/casw-acts.ca/files/documents/casw_code_of_ethics.pdf)

The RSW designation identifies the individuals who meet these three criteria.

This edition of Practice Matters will explore the connection between professionalism and social work regulation by focusing on two elements: education and ethical commitment.

Education:

Scenario #1

Susan has a bachelor of social work degree and recently obtained a position as a policy consultant. Registration was not listed in the position description therefore she is questioning if she should be registered.

The educational criteria for registration is a social work degree accredited by the Canadian Association for Social Work Education or international equivalent. This assures the public of a standard of education which all individuals with a social work degree must possess to graduate. Accreditation standards are rigorous and schools of social work are reaccredited at intervals to ensure that the standards are maintained on an on-going basis. Graduating with an accredited degree is a critical element of social work practice however an individual who has a social work degree may not refer to themselves as a social worker without the RSW designation. This is consistent throughout all provinces in Canada.

Additionally, social work is a diverse profession with a broad scope of practice. Members of this profession work in a variety of positions which are not titled “social worker” or limited to only those with social work degrees. As social work registration is not tied exclusively to one’s job title, individuals with social work education need to reflect on whether they are using their knowledge and skills obtained through their social work education in their position.

Following initial social work registration, annual renewal requires the completion of continuing professional education (CPE). The submission of CPE credits tangibly demonstrates the commitment to life-long learning. Educational qualification and commitment to continuing competence are the hallmarks of professionalism.

Reflecting on this *link*, Susan decides she would like to refer to herself as a social worker. She understands the diversity of social work practice and is committed to life-long learning. She decides to demonstrate her professionalism by completing the registration process and obtaining the RSW designation.

Ethical Commitment:

Scenario #2

William RSW is the only social worker employed in a small community agency. During a recent session with a client, he discovered that several years ago he had dated a family member of that client. He wondered about the potential boundary issues and wanted to be clear on how he should proceed in this situation.

Being a member of the social work profession in Newfoundland and Labrador means that individuals are committed to adhere to the Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW) Code of Ethics and Ethical Guidelines. The vast array of practice resources produced by the NLASW are grounded in this Code. The intent is to provide social workers with the guidance and direction required to navigate the inevitable ethical dilemmas encountered in practice. William reflected on his decision using the NLASW Ethical Decision-Making Tool (2015) and reviewed previous editions of Practice Matters. Through this review he determined that the scenario included in Resolving Conflicts of Interest through Informed Consent (Practice Matters December 2016) was similar to his situation and provided helpful questions for his consideration.

William's ethical commitment to his clients was strengthened through the *link* with his professional registration.

Scenario # 3

Christine RSW struggles with the concept of professionalism which she equates to "professional distance". She is committed to social work but does not want her status as a registered social worker to interfere with activities outside of the workplace. Christine volunteers at a series of fundraisers for a local charity. Her client volunteers with the same organization and often asks Christine to join her for coffee after the fundraising events. Christine decides to consult with a social work colleague and review the CASW Code of Ethics before replying to her client's invitation.

Through these activities, she begins to think about the concept of boundaries as they relate to the client. It is within the context of safe boundaries that a client knows what to expect. Christine has an open discussion with her colleague who asks her how she will handle expectations, confidentiality and additional information which she may learn about the client over coffee.

The CASW Ethical Guidelines (2.4) state "*While having contact with clients in different life situations is not inherently harmful, it is the responsibility of the social worker to evaluate the nature of the various contacts to determine whether the social worker is in a position of power and/or authority that may unduly and/or negatively affect the decisions and actions of their client*". She considers the potential impact on the positive social work relationship she currently has with her client. Through reflection, Christine views the process in which she has engaged as an act of professionalism.

She decides to maintain the professional boundary and have this conversation with her client. This shifts her perspective on professionalism from distant expert to putting the client's needs first. *Linking* the ethical accountability associated with regulation to the value of respecting the inherent dignity and worth of persons assisted with her initial struggle with the concept of professionalism.

Conclusion:

Education and a commitment to the code of ethics are defining elements of both professionalism and professional regulation. Professionalism is solidified through regulation: supporting ethical practice, strengthening the social work profession; advancing the best interest of the public.

References

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