

Professional Conduct

Resolving Complaints: A guide for nurses

How the complaints process helps to uphold practice standards

The College of Nurses of Ontario (the College) is the regulatory body that develops and upholds practice standards for its members. Following the standards helps nurses to provide safe, effective and ethical care. One way the College enforces the standards is by responding to complaints from the public.

Many complaints we receive are resolved early, using a voluntary resolution process. This fact sheet helps you understand this process.

Who can complain to the College?

Public complaints expressing concern about the quality of nursing care often come from nursing clients, their families or others involved in their care. By law, we must address every complaint we receive about nursing care.

Your role as a nursing professional

When the College notifies you of a complaint, you may feel many emotions, including shock, anger, confusion, fear and a need to defend yourself. These emotions can be overwhelming, especially when you feel you have done nothing wrong.

As a nursing professional, your role is to work with the College to help resolve the complaint. You can do this by showing you are accountable for your nursing practice and are committed to maintaining the practice standards.

Resolution is not about placing blame

Since 1995, the College has resolved certain types of complaints using an alternative dispute resolution process. This process is faster, and both nurses and complainants report that the results are more satisfactory. This is because both the complainant and nurse play a big role in how the complaint is addressed.

The resolution process is designed to protect the public by improving nursing practice. It is not designed to punish or discipline nurses. It is not an investigation to determine exactly what happened or to lay blame. By taking part in the process, a nurse is not admitting any wrong-doing. Rather, your participation means you take seriously your professional duty to engage in reflective practice.

How the resolution process works

Alternative dispute resolution is only possible if everyone involved agrees to the process: the complainant, the nurse and the College. After determining that the complaint is suitable for resolution, and getting consent from those involved, a trained facilitator from the College communicates separately with the complainant and the nurse. The complainant and nurse do not meet face-to-face.

The resolution process is based on the College's standards of practice. This means that in their discussions, the nurse and the College facilitator will look at issues raised in the complaint that relate to the standards.

This is an opportunity for nurses to show they are willing to keep learning and striving to maintain and exceed the College's standards of practice.

This reflection may confirm a nurse is meeting the standards, or it may identify areas that need improvement. Nurses themselves are responsible for determining how the reflection relates to their practice. They work with the facilitator to identify steps they can take to improve.

If several nurses are involved in the complaint and it is unclear which nurses the complainant is concerned about, the facilitator may propose that CNO collaborate with the facility to engage a group of nurses in reflective practice.

The College works with the nurse(s) and the complainant to resolve the complaint within the timelines required by legislation.

Reaching an agreement

The facilitator drafts a resolution agreement. The agreement responds to the complainant's concerns and affirms the College's expectations of its members. It must be signed by all parties: the complainant, the nurse or nurses, and the College. For the complainant, signing means they accept the terms of the agreement as a final resolution of their complaint. For the nurse, signing means they must fulfill the terms of their agreement.

Resolution agreements must be approved by the Inquiries, Complaints and Reports Committee. College staff follow up to ensure all commitments in the agreement have been fulfilled.

Resolution agreements are confidential

Everything in an alternative dispute resolution process stays confidential. A resolution agreement is not published in the College's public register or made available to any current or future employer.

What happens if the process fails?

Sometimes the alternative dispute resolution fails. In these cases, the complaint continues through the investigation process. To learn more, please read the *Addressing Complaints* process guide, which you can find on www.cno.org/docs.

For more information

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