The College of Nurses of Ontario presents the Documentation Learning Module
Chapter 4: Security.
When clients entrust their personal information to a health care professional or facility, it is essential that the confidentiality of that information is safeguarded and shared only as necessary in serving the interests of the client. Nurses are accountable for the security of their clients' personal information. Security relates to the access, sharing, storage, retrieval and transmission of client information.
The standard statement for security in the *Documentation, Revised 2008* practice document states: **Nurses safeguard client health information by maintaining confidentiality and acting in accordance with information retention and destruction policies and procedures that are consistent with the standards and legislation.**

This chapter explains how you can meet the expectations of the security standard statement.
A primary piece of legislation that impacts security and documentation is the Personal Health Information Protection Act, 2004. Known as PHIPA, this act outlines the legal collection, use and disclosure of personal health information.

You have a responsibility to understand how PHIPA impacts your practice. The College’s Confidentiality and Privacy – Personal Health Information practice document outlines legislation related to a nurse’s obligation to maintain the confidentiality and privacy of client health information.
In keeping with the requirements of PHIPA, and to meet the College’s security standard, nurses must only access client information for the clients within their care. For example, if a friend is hospitalized at your workplace, you have no authority to access or look at your friend’s health care record.

PHIPA also requires that nurses take steps to ensure the safe storage of personal health information. This includes using physical security, such as locked filing cabinets, and technological security, such as passwords and encryption.

For example, if you are using a portable device, such as a memory stick, to store personal health information about clients, the information should be strongly encrypted. Whenever possible, all personal identifiers should be removed.
More and more, technology is used to communicate with clients and the health care team. While technology offers many advantages for documentation, it also comes with serious risks, including breaching confidentiality. You must be aware of your obligation to protect client confidentiality.

For example, if you use email to communicate with a client regarding his care, you must ensure that the email system is secure.

For more information, review the College’s Telepractice practice guideline.
Clients and their substitute decision-makers are entitled to access, inspect and obtain a copy of the information in their health record. Nurses must facilitate their clients’ right to access health care information.

PHIPA provides conditions under which a client can be denied access to their own personal health information; for example, when access would cause harm to the client or a third party. If you are unsure of a person's authority to access their record, you can review PHIPA or contact the Information and Privacy Commissioner of Ontario.
To meet client care needs, nurses share client information with the health care team. Nurses should ensure that clients understand that confidential information will be shared with team members.

To share information outside the circle of care, such as with an insurance company, you must obtain informed consent from the client or their substitute decision-maker.

However, there are situations in which nurses have a legal obligation to disclose client information to a third party without prior consent from the client. For example, you are required to report child abuse and comply with search warrants during criminal investigations.
Transferring, retaining and disposing of health records can present security issues.

The requirements for the retention of health records may vary depending on the practice setting. You need to be aware of the legislation and organizational policies that stipulate the requirement for the retention of records in your workplace.

When documents are no longer necessary, it is essential to ensure confidentiality is maintained in the process of destroying or transferring the documents.

For example, nurse educators often create worksheets to assist them with assigning clients to students. These worksheets often contain confidential client information, such as name, medication, treatments and diagnosis. When the worksheets are no longer needed, they must be disposed of in a way that ensures client confidentiality is maintained, such as by shredding.
You have now completed Chapter 4 of the Documentation learning module. There are additional chapters in this module. Chapter 1 is an overview of documentation; Chapter 2 explains communication and documentation; Chapter 3 explains a nurse’s accountability regarding documentation; and Chapter 5 is a Test-Yourself chapter, where you can assess your knowledge of nursing documentation.

For more information, close this presentation, return to the Learning Centre and select the chapter of your choice.

If you have a question for a Practice Consultant, click on the link in the upper right-hand corner.