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NCLEX: One step in ensuring safe care

What is the NCLEX?

The National Council Licensure Examination (NCLEX) is an examination for the registration of nurses. It tests the competencies nurses need at the beginning of their careers.

Who has to take it?

Anyone applying to practise as a Registered Nurse in Canada (with the exception of Quebec) must pass the NCLEX exam as well as meet additional requirements to become a member of one of the provincial/territorial regulatory bodies.

Why do we need it?

Ultimately, we need it for patient safety. As the regulators of the nursing profession in Canada, the members of CCRNR are accountable for ensuring that registrations are granted to only those who demonstrate the ability to apply nursing knowledge and provide safe care.

What is it testing?

The exam tests whether an applicant to the nursing profession has the knowledge, skill and judgment needed to provide safe care to the public. For example, the exam tells us whether an applicant is able to: assess and respond to changes in vital signs; perform comprehensive health assessments; assess a client's need for pain management; perform calculations needed to safely administer medications; and maintain client confidentiality and privacy. It does not test the writer's knowledge of a particular health care system, history or legislation.

How was it developed?

The National Council of State Boards of Nursing (NCSBN) developed the NCLEX test to be a psychometrically sound and legally defensible examination consistent with current nursing practice. Canadian nurses from the 10 provinces/territories using the test participated in the development of the NCLEX currently in use. They will continue to participate in its review to ensure it meets the needs of regulators. These provinces/territories began using the test in January 2015.

Are nursing educators involved reviews of the exam?

No. Those involved in reviewing the exam have access to the exam questions. The integrity of the exam is vital and would be compromised if educators who are currently teaching had access to the test questions. However, nurses with previous teaching experience are among the nurses participating in reviews of the exam.

Who administers it?

The NCLEX is administered by the NCSBN, which has a proven track record of developing computer-adaptive exams. The exam portal is administered by computer-based testing provider Pearson VUE.

Is it an American test?

The same NCLEX-RN exam is used for Canadian and U.S. entry to nursing practice. While the exam was originally developed by the NCSBN, it is a test of the competencies deemed necessary for a nurse

— starting in the profession — to provide safe care. It does not test the writer’s knowledge of a particular health care systems, history or legislation. The exam’s continuous, multi-layered review processes include Canadian representatives at each stage. All new items are administered as pretest items to NCLEX writers. This rigorous process ensures that the NCLEX is free from biases that would impede a Canadian writer’s success.

How were applicants tested before this?

Applicants were tested using the Canadian Registered Nurses Exam (CRNE), a paper-based exam administered three times a year by the Canadian Nurses Association.

Why did we change?

Canada's RN nursing regulators are accountable for ensuring that registration is granted to only those who demonstrate the nursing knowledge to provide safe care. We regularly review processes for assessing this to determine which approach is most accessible, fair and efficient. The NCLEX met our requirement for being a valid, secure and psychometrically sound exam that also met the needs of writers, such as year-round access to the exam and faster issuing of exam results.

How are French language writers doing on the exam compared to English writers?

The number of French-language writers of the exam is currently too low to provide reliable data. However, the information we do have suggests that the French translation of the NCLEX-RN is performing similarly to the English version in terms of average response time and response patterns.

What is being done to ensure students have what they need to take the test?

A Canadian nursing education should prepare a student to write the NCLEX since the exam is testing the competencies agreed upon and set by the regulatory bodies of Canada, and upon which nursing courses base their curriculum. Many preparatory resources for students are available on regulators’ websites and through NCSBN, including [Test Plans](#) and information about computer-adaptive testing ([CAT](#)), which is the format of the exam.

What happens if a student fails?

In most jurisdictions, writers can attempt the exam three times. If a writer fails, the writer receives information about how he or she performed in each test area of the exam. The writer can use this information to create a study plan that focuses on the areas of the exam on which he or she under-performed. The writer can also consult the [exam resources](#) on the NCSBN’s website.

What information was provided to educators and schools?

Canadian regulators announced the change to the NCLEX in 2011, giving nursing programs three years to prepare for the exam’s launch on January 1, 2015. Throughout that time, educators had access to several resources through the regulatory bodies and NCSBN to give them the information they needed to prepare students for the exam. These resources included: webinars, regularly updated FAQs, a quarterly NCLEX newsletter, a series of conferences organized by NCSBN, and through NCSBN links to resources such as [Test Plans](#), information about computer-adaptive testing ([CAT](#)), and an online course, [Understanding the NCLEX](#).

What is being done to ensure the test continues to meet Canadian standards, terminology and procedures?

Canadian nurses in the 10 provinces/territories using the test participated in the development of the NCLEX currently in use, and continue to participate in its review to ensure it meets the needs of Canadian exam writers and is free of bias.