

It's Time to Shift the Narrative on Primary Care in Nova Scotia

By Aprill Susin, President, Nurse Practitioners' Association of Nova Scotia (NPANS)

As we celebrate National Nurse Practitioner Week in Canada from November 10th to 16th, it's essential to acknowledge the vital role that Nurse Practitioners (NPs) play in our healthcare system and the transformative impact they have on primary care delivery, particularly in Nova Scotia.

In this province, where more than 400 NPs serve communities, their contributions go well beyond traditional roles.

NPs have a significant degree of professional autonomy, allowing us to assess and diagnose medical conditions, order diagnostic tests and laboratory work, prescribe medications, and refer patients to specialists. We also provide comprehensive care that prioritizes prevention, health promotion, and patient education, ultimately enhancing the overall health and well-being of the populations they serve.

Particularly in communities where family doctors are scarce or overburdened, NPs across the provinces are reducing wait times and increasing access for patients.

Patients know the difference NPs make.

Nearly 170 Nova Scotian NPs work in primary care, each serving as the Most Responsible Healthcare Provider (MRHP) for roughly 800 patients. This means approximately 136,000 Nova Scotians receive their primary care from an NP. To put these numbers further into perspective, recruiting just 50 new NPs into primary care could reduce the Need a Family Practice Registry by another 40,000 people.

Yet despite the measurable difference we're making in communities across the province, efforts to recognize, attract, and retain NPs don't get the level of attention they deserve.

The Province of Nova Scotia has made incredible investments in healthcare in recent years, and the results are showing. Recent reporting showed there were 77,526 people on the Need a Family Practice Registry as of Oct. 1, down from 110,456 in January 2025.

This is excellent progress, but there remains a need to change the narrative around primary caregivers.

We hear it time and time again that *"We need more doctors,"* and yes, attracting more physicians is important. However, the truth is that Nova Scotia doesn't only need more doctors; it needs more providers to be empowered to deliver primary care.

The conversation must shift from who provides care to how we ensure every Nova Scotian has access to care. Increasing the recognition, attraction, and retention of NPs is crucial to achieving this goal.

Encouragingly, recent federal changes to the interpretation of the Canada Health Act are a step in the right direction. As of April 1, 2026, provinces and territories will be required to cover medically necessary services provided by regulated health professionals, including NPs, if those same services would be covered when provided by a physician. This ensures patients are not charged out of pocket and recognizes the essential role NPs play in delivering primary care.

Recognizing NP support as insured health services across all care settings is a vital step in delivering healthcare solutions and improving access to care for Nova Scotians. However, more work is needed to enable NPs to work within their full scope of practice. These efforts will lead to increased attraction and retention.

To get there, NPs need to be included in healthcare policy discussions, bringing their unique expertise to the table. Meaningful collaboration among NPs, physicians, policymakers, and administrators is crucial to building a sustainable healthcare system that genuinely meets the needs of Nova Scotians, one that acknowledges and values the contributions of NPs.

Nova Scotians deserve a healthcare system where access to care is reliable, timely, and person-centred. To continue the momentum the province has built toward this reality, we need to expand our understanding of what primary care looks like and who provides it.

Nurse practitioners are already making a significant difference. With the proper recognition and support, they can do even more.