



# Clinical Nurse Specialist Association of Canada CNS-C

Association des infirmières et infirmiers cliniciens spécialisés du Canada ICS-C

## **Position Statement: The Use of the Title "Dr." by Nurses with Doctoral Degrees in Canada**

### **Introduction**

Across Canada, Clinical Nurses Specialists (CNS) are advancing their education to the doctoral level, obtaining degrees such as the Doctor of Philosophy (PhD), Doctor of Nursing Practice (DNP), Doctor of Nursing Science (DNSc), and other equivalent terminal degrees. These qualifications represent a high level of scholarship, expertise, and commitment to the nursing profession. As nursing evolves to meet the complex needs of the healthcare system, it is essential to recognize and respect the credentials of nurses who have achieved the highest level of academic preparation.

The origin of using the title "Doctor" from universities dates back to the 12<sup>th</sup>/13<sup>th</sup> century of the Middle Ages. At a university level, Doctor was a title which originally denoted "teacher" and resulted from the person earning a university degree. Completing the degree requirements demonstrated attainment of the highest level of knowledge in your field and authority to teach. Nowadays, at convocation, these graduates are formally granted the right to use the title 'Doctor' or 'Dr.' by their universities, in recognition of having successfully completed all academic and professional requirements of their doctoral programs. This title reflects their scholarly achievement and earned expertise.

### **Position Statement**

The Clinical Nurse Specialist Association of Canada supports the right of CNS who have earned a doctoral degree in nursing to use the academic title "Dr." before their name in professional, clinical, academic, and public-facing settings. This includes nurses with doctoral degrees such as the PhD, DNP, DNSc, and other credentials at the doctoral level in nursing.

### **Rationale**

#### **1. Academic Recognition**

The title "Dr." is internationally recognized as a marker of advanced academic achievement. Universities confer this title upon individuals who have completed rigorous doctoral programs that contribute to the advancement of science, knowledge, and practice. Denying doctoral-prepared nurses the ability to use this title risks

devaluing their scholarly contributions and discouraging future academic pursuit within the profession. Clinical Nurse Specialists (CNSs) who hold a Doctoral degree in nursing possess advanced specialty knowledge, highly developed clinical skills, refined critical thinking abilities, and deep clinical expertise within their specific area of practice. Further, graduate-level education equips them to deliver expert care, drive evidence-based practice, lead clinical innovation, and contribute to improved health outcomes across diverse healthcare settings.

## **2. Equity Across Professions**

In Canada, it is customary for professionals in various fields—such as physicians, dentists, optometrists, psychologists, and chiropractors—to use the title "Dr." if they hold a graduate doctoral degree (in contrast to undergraduate degrees<sup>1</sup>). CNSs who have completed similar or more extensive doctoral programs deserve equitable recognition. Supporting the use of the title "Dr." by nurses promotes interprofessional respect and reinforces the legitimacy of nursing as a discipline of knowledge and leadership.

## **3. Transparency and Clarification**

The responsible use of the title "Dr." includes clear communication of one's credentials. Nurses in Canada who use the title should also include their professional designation (e.g., RN, NP) and academic degree (e.g., PhD, DNP, DNSc) to avoid confusion in clinical settings. For example, “Dr. Janet Doe, RN, PhD” or “Dr. Peter Smith, RN, CNS, PhD (Nursing)” clarifies both the academic achievement and the nursing role, ensuring public trust and transparency. CNS-C supports CNSs to respect regulations presently in places that may limit the use of the title Dr. in jurisdictions where this is regulated and limited. It is the regulations that limit the settings in which the title can be used. For example, in Ontario a CNS with an earned doctoral degree in nursing cannot use their title in a clinical setting, while they have the right to use it in any other settings.

## **4. Leadership and Influence**

Doctorally-prepared CNSs are vital to leadership in health policy, education, clinical innovation, and research. In Canada, these nurses often lead research teams, shape healthcare policy, teach in universities, and directly contribute to improved health

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<sup>1</sup> For example, in regard to physicians, dentists, optometrists, and chiropractors, the MD, DDS, OD, and DC are in fact all undergraduate degrees. They are doctor degrees, not doctorate degrees. They are first level in a stream, not third. In French, they are referred to as “diplômes de 1<sup>e</sup> cycle” and PhD as “diplômes de 3<sup>e</sup> cycle”.

outcomes in clinical settings. Recognizing them with the title "Dr." supports visibility, strengthens the nursing voice at decision-making tables, respects expert nurses and reinforces the importance of nursing expertise in shaping Canada's healthcare future.

## Conclusion

Clinical Nurse Specialists (CNSs), with their Doctoral degrees in nursing, are powerful agents of change within healthcare. Advanced knowledge, sharp critical thinking, and exceptional clinical expertise uniquely empower CNSs to push the boundaries of what is possible in healthcare.

CNSs inspire teams, empower patients and clients, and drive innovation — transforming challenges into opportunities and setting new standards of excellence across every corner of the healthcare system.

Nurses in Canada who have earned a doctoral degree in nursing should be acknowledged with the title "Dr." in recognition of their academic and professional accomplishments. This practice aligns with conventions in other professions and enhances nursing's role in academic, clinical, and policy settings. Clear communication of credentials ensures transparency, and equity in title usage promotes respect for the nursing profession and encourages ongoing leadership development.

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P.S. Nurse Practitioner Association of Canada (NPAC) has developed a similar Position Statement in 2014.

<https://npac-aiipc.org/position-statements/use-of-the-title-doctor-by-nurse-practitioners/>