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Full-length Article

The development of a regulatory philosophy to guide and inform the decision-making processes and operations of the college of registered nurses of Alberta☆

Joy Peacock, BSN, MSc, RN [a], Marcie J. Smigorowsky, PhD, NP, CCN(C) [b], Andrew Douglas, BA, MCJ [c], Todd Schnirer, B.Comm, CPA, CGA [d], Greg Loveday, BSc, MBA [e], Nathalia Carolina Fernandes Fagundes, PhD [a,*]

[a] Executive Office, College of Registered Nurses of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada
[b] Strategic Initiatives, College of Registered Nurses of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada
[c] Governance, Regulation & Standards, Executive Office, College of Registered Nurses of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada
[d] People, Planning & Performance Measurement, Executive Office, College of Registered Nurses of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada
[e] Strategy & Operations, Executive Office, College of Registered Nurses of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada

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ABSTRACT

Recently, global and local changes, such as those resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, have influenced the regulation of registered nurses and nurse practitioners. Such changes have resulted in a shift to focusing solely on patient safety and risk management rather than broader public interest goals. This shift raises concerns about the effectiveness of prevailing regulatory practices, leading to calls for innovation, modernization, and change. This report aimed to describe the development and application of a regulatory philosophy based on Right-Touch Relational Regulation (RTRR) adopted by the College of Registered Nurses of Alberta (the College). The development of the regulatory philosophy was operationalized using four phases: conceptualization, assessment, drafting the spectrum, and implementation. This process started in February 2021 and is currently in the implementation phase. The conceptualization phase proposed a new regulatory approach based on right-touch regulation (RTR). The assessment phase resulted in targeted recommendations to align the College processes and culture to RTR philosophy and identified the need to include a relational regulation approach. The College Regulatory Spectrum was drafted and launched in August 2024. Based on the level of discretion required, the Regulatory Spectrum was organized into three different approaches to support decision-making: compliance, RTR, and RTRR. In conclusion, the College proposed and applied a regulatory approach that developed into a foundational philosophy to guide decisions and inform how the College operates. The transition to an RTRR approach enables the College to better serve public interests by using the right level of regulation to ensure safe, ethical, and competent nursing care.

Introduction

In Canada, healthcare professions are regulated by regulatory colleges (Chiu et al., 2023). The colleges' role is to serve the public interest by ensuring that registrants of the profession provide safe, competent, and ethical care. Regulators meet this mandate through the development of entry-to-practice requirements and stringent registration and licensure processes (Davies, 2004). Other important functions of the regulator include developing and enforcing of a code of ethics and standards of practice, as well as handling complaints and conduct issues (World Health Organization, 2024). A clear statement of and adherence to a regulatory philosophy by regulatory colleges is essential when developing expectations for registrants to support patient safety (Leslie et al., 2023). A well-defined philosophy serves as a guiding framework for the values, goals, and actions of an

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* Corresponding author.
E-mail addresses: jpeacock@nurses.ab.ca (J. Peacock), msmigorowsky@nurses.ab.ca (M.J. Smigorowsky), adouglas@nurses.ab.ca (A. Douglas), tschnirer@nurses.ab.ca (T. Schnirer), gloveday@nurses.ab.ca (G. Loveday), nfagundes@nurses.ab.ca (N.C.F. Fagundes).

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organization, fostering a sense of purpose and direction for employees and health ecosystem partners and improving public relationships (Tsoukas et al., 2024).

The College of Registered Nurses of Alberta (the College) operates under the Health Professions Act (HPA) of Alberta (Province of Alberta, 2026) to govern and regulate the practice of registered nurses (RNs), certified graduate nurses, nurse practitioners (NPs), graduate nurses, and graduate nurse practitioners (collectively referred to RNs and NPs throughout this article) in Alberta, Canada. The College regulates approximately 50,000 registrants (College of Registered Nurses of Alberta, 2023). Traditionally, the regulatory approach at the College was focused on compliance with legislation, strictly following the established statutes and rules with little room for compassion or discretion in the decision-making process. However, in February 2021, the College began developing a right-touch relational regulation (RTRR) philosophy. The RTRR aims to be proportionate, transparent, and consistent, ultimately resulting in timely regulation and a potential reduction of harm to the public (Cayton & Webb, 2014; Professional Standards Authority, 2015).

Literature review

Over the past few years, significant global and even more local changes, including changes resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, have influenced the regulation of RNs and NPs. As a result, regulators have shifted to focus solely on patient safety and risk management rather than broader public interest goals (Adams, 2022). Additionally, previous research reported that registrants and health system partners mistrusted regulators and viewed them as punitive and not overly supportive (Browne et al., 2021). In response, regulators are recognizing the need for agile regulatory processes, are changing how they regulate, and are adapting to health system priorities (World Health Organization, 2024).

Concerns have been raised about the effectiveness of prevailing regulatory practices, leading to calls for innovation, modernization, and change (Bilton & Cayton, 2018). The COVID-19 pandemic further exposed deficiencies in the existing system (Bachtel et al., 2020). Regulation in Canada is regional in nature, which can add complexities as the risk tolerance in each jurisdiction varies depending on the philosophical stances of regulatory colleges, their appetite for innovation, and the level of government oversight (Chiu et al., 2025).

The College has been actively working to adapt to changing demands and scenarios by addressing public expectations. For example, the College developed alternative care delivery programs (e.g., the virtual care registration program implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic; Peacock et al., 2024) and is implementing an updated regulatory approach, which is described in this report. Although the College recognized that a compliance-focused approach was effective for certain scenarios and cases, this model lacked agility in decision-making processes in certain situations and limited the ability to consider context when making regulatory decisions. Also, based on international, national, and provincial changes to nursing regulation, the College recognized the need for proportionality, agility, modernization, and compassion (College of Registered Nurses of Alberta, 2024).

The right-touch regulation (RTR) philosophy was proposed more than a decade ago and has since been applied to various regulatory bodies, aiming to be proportionate, transparent, and consistent, ultimately resulting in timely regulation and potential reduction of harm to the public (Cayton & Webb, 2014; PSA, 2015). A relational regulatory approach highlights that regulation practices must be based on mutual trust and collaboration in the interactions between regulated professionals and their regulatory bodies (Penney et al., 2014). In combining the core values of these two approaches in a unique spectrum—the RTRR philosophy—the College aims to enhance the focus on situational context and associated factors, increasing appropriate discretion and accountability to regulatory interventions.

The present article describes the development and application of the professional regulatory approach adopted by the College based on RTRR and outlines the potential benefits offered for the regulation of RNs and NPs.

Development of the college regulatory spectrum

The proposal and development of the College Regulatory Spectrum comprised a four-phase approach: conceptualization, assessment, drafting the spectrum, and implementation. This process started in February 2021 and is currently in the implementation phase. Fig. 1 summarizes the process of the College Regulatory Spectrum development.

Conceptualization

The conceptualization of the Regulatory Spectrum started with selecting and implementing a regulatory approach to incorporate the need for transparency and proportionality to the regulatory mandate in a consistent approach. Right-touch thinking was identified as the potential philosophy that aligned with this goal. Thus, the College's 2021–2026 strategic direction framed the College's mission to protect and serve the public interest using RTR (College of Registered Nurses of Alberta, 2026).

Assessment

An internal committee, the Right-Touch Review Team, was established to support the adherence to right-touch thinking. This committee was composed of one external consultant with expertise in RTR (Harry Cayton) and several staff members, including a senior leader and a representative from each department at the College.

The review team implemented a four-step approach to review and analyze each department's policies and operational practices from February 2021 to June 2022. The goal of this assessment phase was to understand current practices and provide recommendations for alignment to RTR.

A right-touch review was conducted for each of the College's departments: Professional Practice Support, Conduct, Registration, Strategy and Integrated Planning, and the Executive Office. The members of the review team revised the operational practices (i.e., internal policies, procedures, and developed activities) of each department after reviewing policies/processes/procedures (what we read), meeting observations (what we saw), and staff interviews (what we heard) and after consulting relevant legislation and best practices documents (what we reviewed). After the review, College staff received training on RTR, which included in-person and online discussions, literature (including case studies) to review, as well as quizzes to facilitate self-evaluation of their knowledge and comprehension.

Additionally, the review team conducted an organization-wide survey to gather staff perspectives on the College's overall direction, functioning, and commitment to RTR. All staff were invited to participate in the survey. Survey questions involved the following themes: College culture, use and application of right-touch thinking within departments and across the College, and internal accountability and responsibilities. The survey had 28 questions and included both multiple-choice and open-ended questions. Survey results were anonymized, and the survey data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and thematic analysis.

As a result of the assessment phase, the review team developed an organization-wide report to recommend further improvements for each department and to enhance alignment to RTR.

Drafting the spectrum

The College's senior leadership team proposed and discussed items to be included in the spectrum. This phase was based on the main foundational concepts of RTRR as well as on recommendations and insights presented during the assessment phase. The goal of drafting a regulatory spectrum was to develop a tool to assist with regulatory decision-making and balance the College's legislated regulatory mandate with compassion and proportionality. The team designed a logo to visually identify our RTRR model.

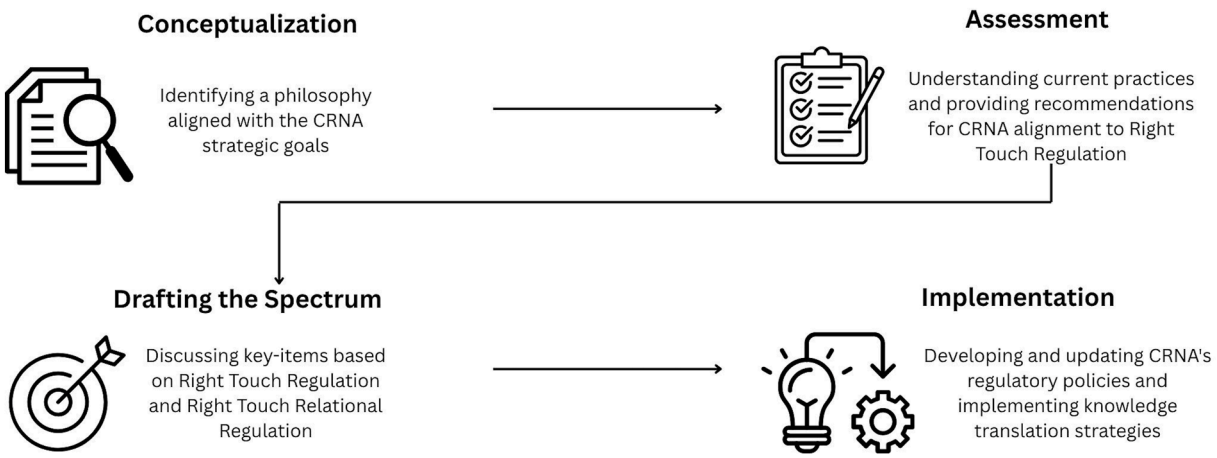

Fig. 1. The CRNA Regulatory Spectrum development. CRNA = College of Registered Nurses of Alberta.

After drafting the regulatory spectrum, the document was presented to the College of Registered Nurses of Alberta's council for review and approval.

Implementation

The implementation strategy for the Regulatory Spectrum encompassed two arms: (1) internal implementation and (2) knowledge translation and communication to the public. The internal implementation arm consisted of the development and update of regulatory policies and decision-making frameworks as coordinated by the College's senior leadership team. The knowledge translation and communication arm consisted of presenting the new Regulatory Spectrum and decision-making frameworks to the public, aiming to be transparent regarding the decision-making process adopted by the College. Change management and communication plans were developed to support this phase. Health system partners, including employers, unions, government bodies, and postsecondary institutions, were consulted and feedback was received regarding the College's regulatory spectrum. Methods of dissemination included the development of webinars, training sections, and a dedicated website section (https://crna.com/protecting-the-public/our-mandate/our-regulatory-philosophy/).

Results

Assessment phase: Survey results and recommendations

The survey had 64 respondents, which represented approximately 70% of College staff. There were similar response rates in each department. The survey's key findings highlighted the need to improve internal processes at the College and improve proportionality and flexibility to make reasonable decisions. The Review Team also identified a lack of consistency or simplicity in information conveyed to the public, as well as challenges with clarity and transparency in roles and responsibilities. In response to these findings, the Review Team outlined 12 recommendations to facilitate the alignment of college practices with RTR:

1. Clarify and document the meaning of diversity, equity, and inclusion.
2. Review the external committees and working groups in which staff participate.
3. Develop organizational standards for data collection, analysis, and measurement.
4. Ensure committee and project membership is proportionate to the assigned task.
5. Ensure that operational practices support agile collaboration between departments and teams.
6. Ensure that communications to external audiences regarding regulatory changes, updates, and risks are developed in a collaborative manner and are proportionate to the risk to public safety and the College legislative mandate.
7. Identify training opportunities for new and existing staff.
8. Establish expectations regarding organization-wide information sharing.
9. Increase understanding of the strategic direction and RTR.
10. Clarify and communicate the roles and responsibilities of staff and College leadership to ensure consistency, transparency, and accountability.
11. Clarify and communicate the balance of College practices to be proportionate, transparent, and agile.
12. Explore opportunities to measure and evaluate outcomes against the College's standard of regulatory excellence to be able to respond to change and inform continuous improvement.

More specifically, the college identified several recommendations to improve decision-making. Also, the need to include a relational component to this process was observed, aiming to maximize regulatory outcomes through connection and collaboration.

Organization of the regulatory spectrum

The College Regulatory Spectrum is a result of the implementation of RTR with the addition of an RTRR approach. The Spectrum, which was presented and endorsed by the College of Registered Nurses of Alberta's Council in March 2024, prioritizes a proportionate, transparent, and accountable regulatory framework that minimizes unnecessary intervention while effectively addressing risks and preventing overregulation.

Based on the level of risk of harm, the Regulatory Spectrum was organized into three levels to reflect different approaches and degrees of discretion to support decision-making processes: compliance, RTR, and RTRR. Fig. 2 describes the Regulatory Spectrum and visually conveys the level of discretion between these three regulatory levels.

Compliance

The compliance-based approach involves a nondiscretionary decision-making process and is focused on registrants' compliance with statutes and rules. This approach is considered in situations that represent a higher risk, and the regulatory decision involves compliance with standards of practice and expected behaviors. An example would be when the registrant commits a serious offense under the HPA and sanctions are clearly laid out in existing legislation (e.g., an RN is identified as committing sexual misconduct after investigation). In this

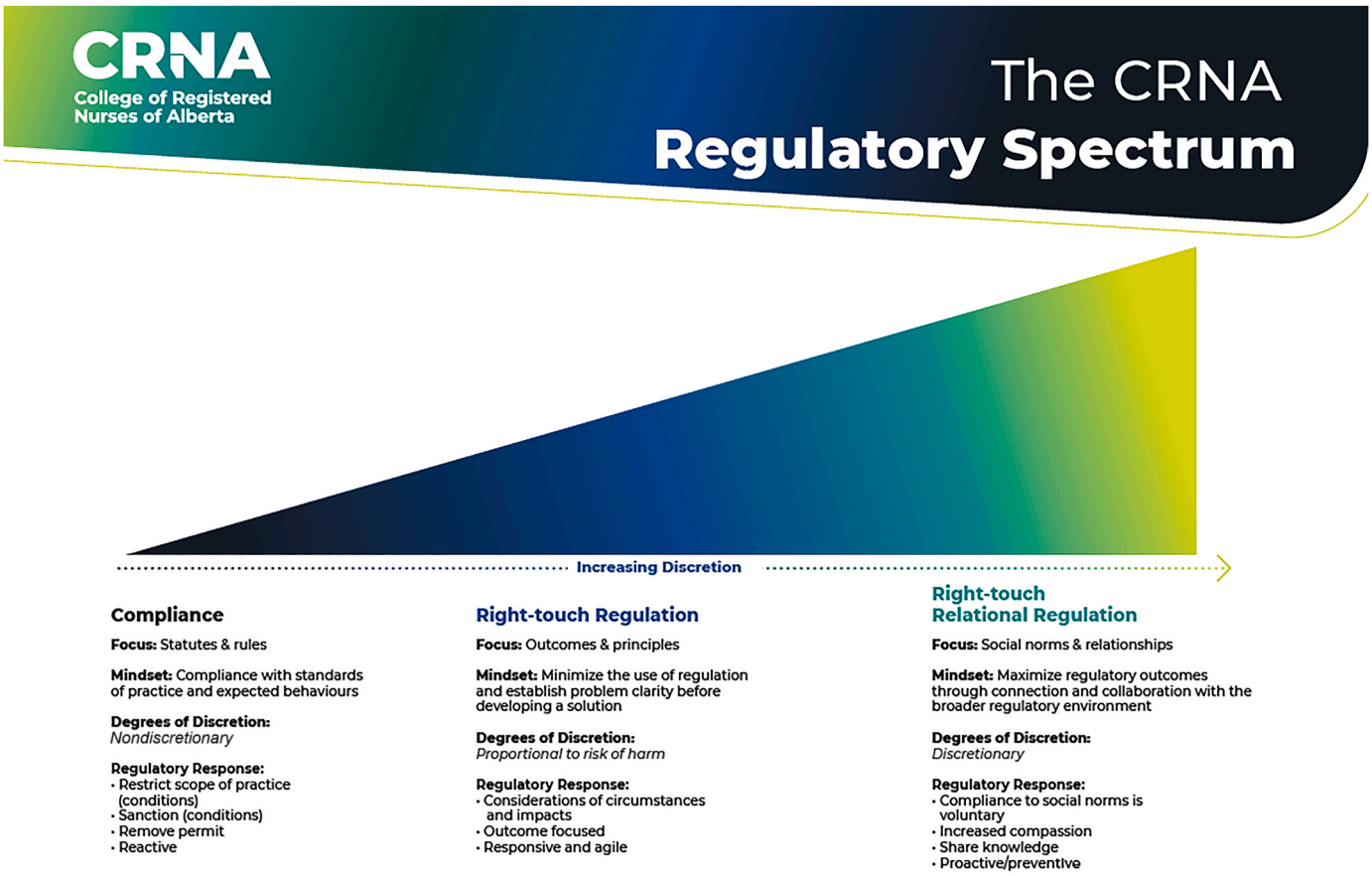

Fig. 2. The CRNA regulatory spectrum. CRNA = college of registered nurses of Alberta.

scenario, the application of the Regulatory Spectrum would allow very little discretion and flexibility in the regulatory response. The risk of harm is likely high and the regulatory response to these scenarios will be reactive to the misconduct, which may result in serious sanctions such as suspension or removal of the registration.

RTR

The RTR-based approach is focused on the outcomes and principles of practice and involves a level of discretion that is proportional to the risk of harm. The mindset for decision-making in this situation is to minimize the use of regulation and the nondiscretionary decision-making process and to establish clarity of the problem before developing a solution.

An example of this approach, taking into consideration the principle of proportionality related to risk of harm, is the College's increased flexibility regarding the annual practice permit renewals process. For example, in the new model, the applicant is only required to submit the supporting documentation applicable to their specific case during the permit renewal process. There is no obligation to submit all the formal supporting documentation (e.g., continuing competence requirements), unless the college specifically requests the registrant to provide them. In this approach, the College made an internal policy change that does not take away from the essential requirements for annual permit renewal but will be outcome focused, considering the circumstances and their impacts. Such changes are intended to be responsive and agile while protecting the public.

RTRR

The RTRR-based approach is focused on social norms and relationships and involves a discretionary decision-making process. The mindset for this approach is to maximize the outcomes by making decisions through connection and collaboration with a broader regulatory environment. Ultimately, the addition of RTRR would decrease the amount of overregulation and unnecessary interventions. For example, the College meets regularly with health system partners to understand health system needs and be active partners in the development of regulatory approaches to meet the desired goals. In this approach, the regulatory response will be based on proactive and preventive actions, with increased compassion and a goal to share knowledge, in which the compliance with social norms is voluntary.

Regulatory spectrum implementation strategies

The implementation phase of the Regulatory Spectrum is still ongoing. The strategies adopted by the College included change management and communication plans. Decision frameworks that guided operational practices were updated to support standardized, defined, and consistent decisions across the College. The frameworks are divided in two sections: the HPA frameworks, which encompasses six frameworks outlining the approach to delivering the College's mandate; and the operational frameworks, represented by 12 frameworks supporting the execution of HPA frameworks. Webinars and staff training were developed. Additionally, to ensure transparency of the College operations and compliance with the proposed regulatory approach, key operational documents, including the Regulatory Policy Manual, were made publicly available on the College website (https://crna.com/media/fwflz0ns/crna-regulatory-policy-manual-january-2026-final.pdf).

In addition, a regulatory blueprint was prepared and launched in February 2025. The College regulatory blueprint supports all College activities and is structured around three pillars: (1) Foundation, which states the College's regulatory philosophy and uses it as a guide to

interpret relevant legislation and mandates; (2) Direction, which states the incorporation of the College's guiding principles in the creation of decision-making frameworks that guide our operations; and (3) Execution, which describes the purposeful allocation and structure of College resources to deliver their products and services. The development of an engagement map to improve ongoing awareness, understanding, and internalization of regulatory changes among employees is still ongoing to ensure transition to the Regulatory Spectrum.

The communication plan and knowledge translation strategies of the Regulatory Spectrum to the public included the development of a dedicated section on the College website to present and explain the Regulatory Spectrum (College of Registered Nurses of Alberta, 2024). In addition, a series of seven monthly webinars and videos were presented to discuss the new regulatory approach of the College and how it affects public safety (College of Registered Nurses of Alberta, 2025). Meetings with key health system partners were also held to receive feedback regarding the new regulatory approach. Future knowledge dissemination strategies will include continuous expansion of public communications.

Discussion

The College has developed a regulatory approach that prioritizes a proportionate, transparent, and accountable regulatory framework based on RTR and RTRR philosophies. This approach minimizes intervention while effectively addressing risks and potentially prevents overregulation. Additionally, this approach aligns with the research questions presented by the global agenda proposed in 2021 by the Envisioning the Future of Nursing Regulation Through Research forum (Alexander et al., 2021). This global agenda highlighted the need to identify risk-reduction approaches that regulators could adopt to better protect the public. The College Regulatory Spectrum aimed to improve regulation efficiency and reduce risk by practicing proportionality and being accountable to the regulatory decision-making process.

Although the approach described in this report was applied to a regulatory mandate, it represents a professional approach that could be adopted in multiple environments in a decision-making process. The core values of the College Regulatory Spectrum values discretion and proportionality in decision-making, assessing the risk and level of discretion needed in each case. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, risk-oriented tools have been applied more widely among health profession regulators, resulting in a reduction of public harm (Leslie et al., 2023).

Also, including RTR and RTRR philosophies in the compliance-based regulatory approach previously adopted by the College aligns with the regulator mandate to protect the public interest rather than advocate for health professionals' self-interests (Adams, 2022). Such advocacy, as well as scenarios of overregulation, have been consistent concerns in nursing self-regulation (Curtis & Schulman, 2006; Saver, 2010). The adoption of professional standards that value the public interest, including RTR, has been suggested as a solution to avoid prioritization of advocacy (Jarosz, 2020).

The College Regulatory Spectrum adopted these concepts to its regulation mandate using a structured methodology. One of our strengths in this process is represented by the proposed internal reform in the College's organizational culture. In performing a self-evaluation of operation protocols, training the staff, and implementing appropriate changes to align their approach to the RTR and RTRR, we ensured that the College's philosophy was aligned to its operations and standard of practice.

The outcomes of the full implementation of the College regulatory approach and the impact to the public are not yet measurable. As highlighted by the global agenda of the future in research on nursing regulation, there is a need to understand the outcomes associated with the adoption of right-touch principles in regulatory processes (Alexander et al., 2021). Future assessments will inform the impact of the College Regulatory Spectrum on public interest outcomes.

The College Regulatory Spectrum was developed considering the global and local needs of the College's operational processes. Although RTR, one of the foundational philosophies adopted, was developed in 2015 (PSA, 2015), it may not entirely account for the regulatory and global changes over the past decade. The College also included an RTRR approach to account for these global regulatory changes. Also, it is important to acknowledge that the foundational RTR framework, originally developed by the Professional Standards Authority in the United Kingdom is currently under review and an updated version of this approach is being prepared (PSA, 2025). Applicable changes and updates to the College regulatory approach will be discussed upon the release of the updated version of this philosophy.

In addition, trends in regulatory reform in Canada may further impact the College's regulatory approach. For example, several discussions have been presented regarding the amalgamation of regulatory colleges and the end of self-regulation (Durcan et al., 2023). The province of Alberta is just one jurisdiction that has adopted a co-regulation model for health profession councils. The oversight body is comprised of 50% members of the profession and 50% members of the public, which contributes to enhanced public trust, accountability of regulatory practices, and protection of the public.

Conclusion

The College of Registered Nurses of Alberta has proposed and applied a regulatory approach based on an RTRR philosophy. This model values the adoption of proportionality and discretion to regulatory decisions, which is better aligned to serve the public interest. Changes in internal organizational culture and potential benefits to the public were identified in the implementation phase of this model. Future steps include a full implementation of RTRR in the College to increase proportionality and enhance public safety.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Joy Peacock: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Conceptualization. **Marcie J. Smigorowsky:** Writing – review & editing, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Andrew Douglas:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Investigation. **Todd Schnirer:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Investigation. **Greg Loveday:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Investigation. **Nathalia Carolina Fernandes Fagundes:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Data curation.

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Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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