Newfoundland & Labrador
College of
Social Workers

Artificial Intelligence in Social Work Practice: Ethical and Practice Considerations

Explanatory Document

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Note: Social workers have a responsibility to be aware of and adhere to the Newfoundland and Labrador College of Social Workers (NLCSW) (2024) Standards of Practice for Social Workers in NL, the Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW) Code of Ethics (2024).

Introduction

The Newfoundland and Labrador College of Social Workers (NLCSW) regulates the practice of social work in Newfoundland and Labrador (NL) under provincial legislation titled the Social Workers Act, SNL 2010, c.S-17.2. The vision is Excellence in Social Work.

This framework is a companion document to the NLCSW (2024) Standards of Practice. The NLCSW has also developed an explanatory document on *Technology Use in Social Work Practice (2021)*, which addresses related issues and should be reviewed alongside this resource.

The practice of social work is grounded in principles of human dignity, social justice, professional integrity, and the importance of human relationships. As technology continues to evolve, artificial intelligence (AI) is becoming increasingly integrated into the environments in which social workers deliver services, make decisions, and support service users. The rapid advancement of AI presents new opportunities for innovation and efficiency while also raising important questions related to ethics, accountability, professional responsibility, and client well-being.

The overall purpose of this document is to explore some of the ethical challenges and practice considerations regarding AI that must be examined, to support the thoughtful, ethical, and responsible use of AI in social work practice. Its purpose is to help social workers navigate the use of AI in ways that uphold the profession's values, strengthen informed decision-making, and promote the best interests of the individuals, families, and communities with whom we work.

Definition of AI

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (n.d.) defines an AI system as "a machine-based system that, for explicit or implicit objectives, infers, from the input it receives, how to generate outputs such as predictions, content, recommendations, or decisions that can influence physical or virtual environments."

AI is the ability of computer systems to simulate human cognitive functions, such as learning, reasoning, and problem-solving, to support decision-making and complete complex tasks. AI refers to a range of technologies that enable computers to perform tasks that typically require human intelligence. One subset of AI, known as Generative AI, is the most applicable to the field of social work. This type has the capacity to create new content by drawing on patterns identified within existing data and information (Reamer, 2023).

Emergence of AI in Social Work

In social work, the emergence of AI is creating new opportunities to enhance service delivery, support decision-making, and improve administrative efficiency. As social workers explore the potential benefits of AI, ongoing ethical reflection is essential to ensure that its use does not compromise the profession's core values, principles, and commitment to service users.

AI should be adopted cautiously and in a manner that is consistent with the Social Workers Act (2010), the CASW Code of Ethics (2024) and the NLCSW's Standards of Practice (2024). Decisions regarding the use of AI must be guided by professional judgment, ethical responsibilities, and the best interests of service users. Social workers should carefully consider issues of privacy and confidentiality, informed consent and client autonomy, integrity and competence, and algorithm bias, while maintaining a critical awareness of the capabilities and limitations of AI technologies.

Ethical and Practice Considerations Related to AI Use

Privacy and Confidentiality

Confidentiality is a core principle of the social work profession and forms the foundation of trust within the therapeutic relationship. Social workers have an ethical and professional responsibility to protect the privacy and confidentiality of the people with whom they work. This responsibility extends to the integration of AI into social work services, requiring social workers to maintain privacy and confidentiality when using such technological platforms.

The CASW Code of Ethics (2024) highlights the importance of upholding "people's right to privacy and to the confidentiality of information shared and documented in official written or electronic records" (p. 19). Social workers must be mindful of the information they enter in AI systems and avoid inputting any personal, confidential, or identifying client details that could compromise privacy.

The NLCSW Standards of Practice (2024) highlight the need for social workers to "develop risk management strategies and inform clients of precautions that are being taken to minimize potential breaches of client information such as encrypted e-mails, firewalls, and passwords" (p. 12). By exercising caution when engaging with AI technologies, social workers can help ensure that client information remains protected while still benefiting from the potential advantages these tools offer.

Ultimately, the responsibility for safeguarding client confidentiality remains with the social worker, including ensuring that service users' written and electronic records are stored securely and that reasonable measures are taken to prevent unauthorized access.

Informed Consent & Autonomy

The ethical integration of AI in social work requires a commitment to informed consent and client autonomy, ensuring that individuals can make knowledgeable and voluntary decisions regarding the services they receive. Social workers must be transparent about when and how AI tools are used, explain their potential benefits, risks, and limitations, and obtain informed consent before implementing such technologies. Transparency is particularly important because technology-related breaches and errors can have significant consequences for clients and agencies (Reamer, 2023).

This responsibility is reflected in the CASW Code of Ethics (2024), which states that "social workers respect the rights of service users to make decisions based on voluntary consent when possible" (p. 8). In the context of AI, this principle emphasizes clients' rights to be informed about and voluntarily consent to technologies that may collect, analyze, or store

personal information. Similarly, the NLCSW Standards of Practice (2024) require that "social workers provide clients with information on how social work records will be maintained and who will have access to those records" (p. 6). As AI systems may influence the processing, storage, and accessibility of client information, social workers have an ethical obligation to explain these practices and support clients in making informed choices about their care.

By promoting transparency and respecting clients' right to choose whether AI is involved in service delivery, social workers uphold professional ethical standards while supporting client self-determination.

Integrity and Competence

When developing case plans and interventions, social workers must ensure that they are practicing within their level of competence and accurately representing their knowledge, skills, and professional expertise. The CASW Code of Ethics (2024) states that social workers "demonstrate due care for the interests and safety of service users by restricting professional practice to areas of proven competence" (p. 25). As AI becomes increasingly integrated into professional practice, social workers must understand both the capabilities and limitations of these tools before incorporating them into their work. While AI can assist with tasks such as generating case plans, identifying potential interventions, and organizing information, it cannot replace the knowledge, critical thinking, and professional judgment required in social work practice. AI-generated recommendations may suggest interventions that fall outside a social worker's scope of competence or may not be appropriate for a client's unique circumstances. It is therefore the responsibility of the social worker to critically evaluate any AI-generated content and ensure they possess the necessary skills, training, and expertise to implement recommended interventions safely and effectively.

The NLCSW Standards of Practice (2024) state that "social workers only use emerging evidence-based knowledge and theory that aligns with social work ethics. Social workers use professional judgment and evaluate the effectiveness of these approaches to ensure client protection from harm" (p. 5). Maintaining integrity when using AI requires social workers to apply professional judgment to all information generated by these tools and to ensure that recommendations are consistent with current evidence, ethical standards, and the client's best interest. AI systems may overlook important contextual, cultural, systemic, or relational factors that are essential to understanding a client's lived experiences. As such, case plans must continue to be developed collaboratively with clients and grounded in their strengths, values, and self-determined goals. Social workers remain fully accountable for all assessments, decisions, and interventions, regardless of whether AI

tools are used to support their work. The use of AI does not transfer responsibility for professional decision-making; rather, it requires heightened competence, critical reflection, and integrity to ensure that services remain ethical, evidence-informed, and focused on client well-being.

Bias

It is important for social workers to understand that AI systems draw on large volumes of data to generate responses, and these datasets may not accurately represent the diverse experiences, identities, and circumstances of the clients they serve. As a result, the use of AI carries the risk that "algorithms used to assess clients and develop interventions and treatment plans will incorporate significant bias related to race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, gender expression, and other vulnerable or protected categories" (Reamer, 2023). If these biases are not recognized and addressed, AI informed decisions may contribute to inequitable outcomes and reinforce existing social inequalities.

To mitigate these risks, social workers must critically evaluate the AI tools they use and continue to develop their cultural competence. The CASW Code of Ethics (2024) emphasizes the profession's commitment to lifelong learning and cultural competence, highlighting the importance of "learning the customs, beliefs, and practices of the communities they work with to build cultural safety and foster trust" (p. 7). By strengthening their understanding of diverse populations and remaining mindful of potential biases embedded within AI systems, social workers can promote more equitable, culturally responsive, and ethically sound practice.

Documentation

The NLCSW (2024) Standards of Practice state that "the primary purpose of social work recording is to provide a clear statement of social work assessment, intervention, and professional decision making" (p. 5). Documentation is a core responsibility in social work practice. Accurate and comprehensive documentation is essential to effective service delivery, continuity of care, risk management, and accountability. It also serves as an important legal and ethical record of the services provided.

The above noted ethical considerations must be considered prior to using AI to assist in documentation. AI systems may omit important contextual details, misinterpret information, generate inaccurate content, or make assumptions that are not supported by case evidence. Such errors may go unnoticed if social workers rely on AI-generated documentation without careful review and verification. Oversights in documentation can compromise the development of effective and appropriate case plans, potentially leading to inefficient interventions, missed risks, or threats to client safety. Inaccurate records may

also impact service coordination and continuity of care, particularly when multiple professionals rely on documentation to inform assessment and intervention.

Documentation is time-consuming, and many AI platforms promise efficiency, speed, and reduced administrative burden. When workloads are high, it can be tempting to rely on AI to summarize notes or generate documentation; however, any information generated through AI should be reviewed for accuracy, completeness, relevance, and alignment with the client's unique circumstances before being incorporated into a client's file. Social workers must ensure that documentation continues to reflect their own assessment, analysis, and decision-making processes, while meeting professional, ethical, and legal standards for documentation (NLCSW, 2021).

Environmental Impacts

As outlined in the CASW Code of Ethics (2024), social workers have a responsibility to "advocate for the stewardship of natural resources and the protection of the environment for the common good of all people" (p. 12). This ethical obligation is increasingly relevant as artificial intelligence (AI) becomes more integrated into social work practice. Although AI offers significant benefits, these technologies also consume substantial amounts of energy and natural resources. The development, training, and operation of AI systems require large scale data centers that use significant amounts of electricity and water, contributing to greenhouse gas emissions and environmental degradation (Environmental Defence, 2025).

Given the profession's commitment to environmental sustainability, social workers must carefully consider the environmental implications of their use of AI. The CASW Code of Ethics (2024) further emphasizes the responsibility to "promote the protection of the environment, land, air, water, plants, and animals as essential to the well-being of all people" (CASW, 2024, p. 10). Considering the environmental impact of AI is an ethical responsibility, as the technology's benefits must be balanced against its consumption of energy, natural resources, and infrastructure. Responsible AI use means making conscious choices that minimize environmental harm while maximizing positive outcomes, ensuring that innovation supports long term sustainability (van Wynsberghe, 2021). Social workers can align their use of emerging technologies with the profession's broader commitment to social and environmental justice.

Workplace Responsibility and Jurisprudence

As outlined in the *NLCSW Standards of Practice* (2024), social workers are ethically responsible for delivering high-quality services, using organizational resources appropriately, advocating for effective and equitable policies, and upholding professional standards. As AI becomes increasingly integrated into practice, social workers must adapt

while remaining grounded in these ethical principles. Given that policies and regulations often lag behind technological advancements, social workers have a responsibility to engage in ongoing discussions about the ethical use of AI, advocate for appropriate safeguards, and ensure its use serves clients' best interests.

Social workers also have a responsibility to understand and comply with the legal frameworks governing the use of AI. The *NLCSW* Standards of Practice (2024) identify jurisprudence as a core professional standard, recognizing that "social workers practice within environments where there is a high degree of legal accountability" (p. 13). As AI-related legislation continues to evolve, social workers must remain informed about relevant provincial and federal laws, as well as organizational policies and procedures. Social workers are responsible for seeking guidance from employers, supervisors, and regulatory bodies when necessary to ensure their use of AI remains both legally and ethically compliant.

How Can Social Workers Use AI Safely and Responsibly?

1. *Protect Privacy and Confidentiality*

Social workers must safeguard client confidentiality and privacy at all times. Identifying information should not be entered into AI systems unless all privacy, security, legal, and organizational requirements have been met.

2. *Adopt secure AI technologies*

Social workers need to ensure AI platforms are compliant with provincial and federal legislation relating to the protection of personal health information (Personal Health Information Act, 2008)

3. *Be Transparent and Obtain Informed Consent*

When AI is used in practice, social workers should be transparent with service users about:

- How AI is being used
- Its purpose and potential benefits
- Its limitations and risks

This supports informed decision-making.

4. *Maintain Professional Judgment*

AI is a support tool, not a replacement for professional expertise. Social workers remain responsible for:

- Critical thinking
- Ethical decision-making
- Professional judgment
- Accountability for practice decisions

5. *Critically Evaluate AI Outputs*

AI-generated recommendations, assessments, or interventions should be carefully reviewed before use. Social workers should only rely on AI outputs when they align with:

- Evidence-informed practice
- Professional standards

- Client needs and context
- Their professional expertise

6. *Commit to Ongoing Learning*

Social workers should stay informed about emerging AI technologies and their limitations. They should evaluate AI-generated information for:

- Accuracy
- Reliability
- Relevance
- Potential bias
- Cultural responsiveness

This helps ensure ethical, equitable, and competent practice.

7. *Consider Environmental Impact*

Social workers should be mindful of the environmental impact of digital technologies, including AI, and use these tools responsibly and thoughtfully whenever possible.

8. *Be Aware of Relevant Legislation*

Social workers must stay informed about legislation relevant to their area of practice and demonstrate an ongoing commitment to learning about new and evolving legislation as it is introduced.

Conclusion:

As AI becomes increasingly integrated into social work practice, social workers have a professional responsibility to remain current with emerging technologies and the ethical considerations associated with their use. Competent practice requires ongoing education and critical evaluation of AI tools to ensure they are used in ways that support, rather than undermine, the best interests of clients. As Reamer (2023) notes, "social workers who incorporate AI into their practice have an ethical duty to keep pace with research-informed developments and adjust their protocols accordingly" (p. 63). By staying informed about advances in AI, recognizing its limitations, and continually adapting practice based on current evidence, social workers can uphold professional standards, protect client wellbeing, and ensure that technology is used in a manner that is ethical, effective, and client centered.

Given the rapid evolution of AI and the many ways it can be integrated into practice, this guideline for the ethical use of AI in social work is intended to be a living document. Revisions will be made as legislation, policies, procedures, and best practices continue to evolve.

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