

Joint Position Statement on Nursing Work Environments

The North Carolina Board of Nursing and The North Carolina Division of Health Service Regulation

Background:

Nursing work environments have been consistently linked to patient safety. The Institute for Safe Medication Practices (ISMP) affirmed in 2003 that: “long work hours and the fatigue that results represent a serious threat to patient safety.”

The Institute of Medicine (2003), in addressing the work environment of nurses, noted that long work hours pose a threat to patient safety. They noted that fatigue slows reaction time, diminishes attention, and contributes to medical errors. This study concluded that the elimination of mandatory overtime is essential to patient safety and to the health and well-being of nurses.

The NC Institute of Medicine (NCIOM) Task Force on the North Carolina Nursing Workforce Report (May 2004) recommended as a “high priority” that the North Carolina Board of Nursing (BON) and North Carolina Division of Health Service Regulation (DHSR) work together to implement regulations to address nurses working excessive hours in the provision of direct patient care. As noted in the NCIOM Executive Summary, orientation and supervised on-the-job training is essential in helping new nurses or nurses working in unfamiliar environments understand their job responsibilities and obtain the confidence and skills necessary to provide quality care.

The missions of the BON and DHSR have guided their approach to this issue. The assurance of the protection, well-being, and safety of the public receiving care in diverse healthcare settings is a shared responsibility. The BON regulates the delivery of safe, effective nursing care. The DHSR regulates and ensures the safe, adequate care of people in medical, mental health, and group care facilities.

In response to the NCIOM recommendation, a “think tank” was convened in October 2004 to discuss implications and concerns related to limitation of working hours. A core group was then identified to review and explore the relevant literature, employer data, and existing legislation. This group recommended that a joint position statement be developed and that the BON provide clarification to nurses who question limitations on work hours and mandatory overtime.

Purpose:

The purpose of this Joint Statement on Nursing Work Environments is to provide guidance to administrators, managers, and direct care nurses within NC healthcare facilities as they work together in assuring the development and maintenance of safe work environments.

Statement:

Extended work hours, whether mandatory or voluntary, pose a significant threat to patient safety. The BON statement on "[Staffing and Patient/Client Safety](#)" should be used as a guide for nurses in deciding whether to accept an assignment and for managers in deciding whether to make an assignment. Refusing to work mandatory overtime does not constitute patient abandonment. Once accepted, however, assignments must be fulfilled until reported off to another nurse. Nurses and managers need to avoid overtime hours if either has reason to believe that the licensee is sleep deprived or performance is otherwise compromised. Nurses must communicate safety concerns clearly to managers and those working in more than one job must exercise caution in self-regulating their total hours worked. It is the position of the BON and DHSR that work hours must be managed by all concerned with an emphasis on safe patient care.

Education and training are essential in maintaining and improving nursing competencies. Agency-specific learning begins with a thorough orientation and extends as assignments change throughout the employment relationship. In addition, an effective, timely orientation must be provided for contract and float nurses if they are to ensure patient safety. The limitations of nurses working with unfamiliar patient populations and circumstances must be recognized and addressed as assignments are negotiated.

The BON and DHSR support creative solutions that proactively address nursing work environment issues. Administrators, managers, and direct care nurses are encouraged to collaborate to find safe solutions to these challenges. Agency leaders and nurses share in this responsibility to assure that the appropriate environmental systems and supports are implemented. Patients need and deserve nurses who are supported in their ability to deliver safe, effective, quality patient care. Both the BON and DHSR are committed to ensuring that North Carolina patients receive effective care in a safe environment.

References:

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