

ASK A PRACTICE ADVISOR

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Staffing in Emergency Departments

Question: I work in a rural hospital where RN staffing in the emergency department does not have RNs 24/7. What is my professional responsibility and accountability in this situation?

A component of RN professional responsibility is to be familiar with the legislation that exists regarding your facility and your role in the provision of services. As facilities attempt to compensate for the widespread RN shortages in our province, new staffing measures are being suggested that may not be congruent with either legislation or professional standards. You may find that you are the sole RN working the night shift in a facility and have an assignment that does not include your physical presence in the emergency department, and that other personnel are assigned to that area. *The Hospital Standards Regulations, 1988* [section 11(3)] requires that there be at least one RN on each shift and at work 24/7 in order for hospitals to provide services.

What is my professional responsibility and accountability in this situation?

The RN Act (1988) holds RNs accountable and responsible for the coordination of care and as such, the client must receive an assessment by the RN. Based on the results of this assessment and the needs of the patient, the RN may decide to assign care to another care provider (e.g. grad nurse, LPN, special care aide, etc). Proper assignment of care must be based on the RN assessment. In this example where RNs are not in the emergency department, the RN in the facility must be made aware of all persons presenting to the emergency department to ensure that they are assessed by the RN.

The SRNA believes that in an environment such as the emergency department, the RN with the breadth and depth of knowledge, skills and judgment must assess the patient and triage and then determine the appropriate healthcare professional to be assigned to provide care to that client. Wherever care is provided, the focus must be on client safety and their health care needs. The safety of our clients

must never be compromised by substituting less qualified workers when the knowledge, skill and judgment of an RN are required. As environmental complexity and unpredictability increases there is a need for RNs to provide a full range of client centered care requirements.

RNs are held accountable to practice according to professional association documents, (e.g. SRNA Standards and Foundation Competencies for the Practice of Registered Nursing, CNA Code of Ethics, position statements, etc.). SRNA standards and competencies clearly state that RNs must advocate and intervene in the client's best interest, report unsafe or potentially unsafe practice situations, and take the necessary action to correct them. Facility policies should be in place clearly outlining all employees' roles and responsibilities to guide the services to be provided and to ensure optimal outcomes.

Employer job descriptions and policies also provide guidance with further support provided from national specialty association documents (e.g. National Emergency Nurses Affiliation Inc. (NENA)).

The national nursing group NENA provides a variety of resources including position statements on emergency nursing and the role of the emergency department nurse and triage nurse (www.nena.ca).

If you are an RN interested in emergency nursing consider joining the SRNA professional practice group SENG (Saskatchewan Emergency Nurses Group).

Links to this are on the SRNA website www.srna.org under Nursing Resources or <http://seng.nena.ca/>

If you have any questions regarding this topic or others, contact an SRNA Nursing Advisor, Practice at 1-800-667-9945 ext. 237 or 359-4237.

References:

Government of Saskatchewan. 1980. *The Hospital Standards Regulations, 1988*. Regina: Author.