

ASK A PRACTICE ADVISOR

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The Importance of Policy in Nursing Care

Question:

In our health care facility many policies are outdated, obsolete or non-existent.

How important is it to have current policies and is there a process I can follow to assist in their development?

Answer:

Having current policies in place is important to the effective delivery of health care services. Policies support the RN in delivering safe, competent and ethical nursing care and support the employer in providing a quality professional practice environment to ensure the delivery of safe care to patients, clients, and communities. The employer and the RN have a shared responsibility for policy.

It is the responsibility of the employer to have policies in place, not only for the benefit of clients and staff but also to address risk management issues. It is the responsibility of the RN to be aware of the policies and to identify and communicate to the appropriate people, situations where policies would facilitate the provision of safe, competent nursing care.

The Code of Ethics for Registered Nurses (2002) clearly articulates the ethical responsibility of RNs regarding policy, "Nurses should promote appropriate and ethical care at the organizational/agency and community levels by participation in the development, implementation and ongoing review of policies and procedures designed to provide the best care for persons with the best use of available resources given current knowledge and research" (p. 15).

If you are encountering recurring situations or dilemmas in your nursing practice this may signal the need for policy development or the review of current policy. Discuss the issue with your manager and colleagues, including members of other disciplines. It is important to start a dialogue and use a collaborative approach in developing policy. Working collaboratively and involving all the relevant parties will help to ensure that all aspects and concerns around the issue are addressed and the best policy is developed. Consider including clients in the process if and when appropriate.

Your employer will most likely have a process to follow for the development of policy. If there is no process in place the following guide can be used:

- Identify the issue and its root cause.
- Define your outcomes. What do you want to

achieve with this policy and for whom? Is it safer client care, less role confusion or better communication? How are others affected by this policy?

- Define the information needed to develop the policy.
- Gather and review the relevant research. Use best practice guidelines and practice standards if available.
- Organize the information and develop a draft.
- Ensure it conforms to legal, ethical, social, cultural and environmental standards.
- Provide opportunity for feedback from all relevant stakeholders.
- Create an effective communication plan for policy implementation.
- Evaluate effectiveness and ensure ongoing review.

When developing policy keep in mind that the best policies:

- Are practical and evidence based.
- Involve those who are affected by the policy at all stages in the process. If you want a policy to be relevant and workable then it is imperative that RNs at all levels in the organization, especially front line clinical RNs, be involved in the development and ongoing review.
- Identify clear roles and responsibilities of RNs and other health care providers.

Remember that policies should facilitate and support safe nursing care. Employer policies can never supercede the standards and accountabilities of the RN as outlined by the professional regulatory association.

Although policy development may appear daunting, RNs do have the knowledge and expertise necessary to develop policy. Because we are involved in decision-making and implementation of policies at the clinical level, it is important that we are involved in their development. This ensures that they will be relevant, workable and facilitate quality patient care and outcomes.

References:

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