

Position Statements

Assuring Patient Safety: The Employers' Role in Promoting Healthy Nursing Work Hours for Registered Nurses in All Roles and Settings

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Adopted by: ANA Board of Directors

Purpose: This position statement articulates the American Nurses Association's position with regard to patient¹ safety and encourages employers of registered nurses² to establish policies and procedures that promote healthy nursing work hours and patterns that do not extend beyond the limits of safety for both nurses and patients.

ANA Position: Given the well-documented relationship between nurse fatigue and an increased risk of nurse error with the potential for compromising patient care and safety, it is the position of the American Nurses Association that all employers of registered nurses should ensure sufficient system resources to provide the individual registered nurse in all roles and settings with:

1. a work schedule that provides for adequate rest and recuperation between scheduled work; and
2. sufficient compensation and appropriate staffing systems that foster a safe and healthful environment in which the registered nurse does not feel compelled to seek supplemental income through overtime, extra shifts, and other practices that contribute to worker fatigue.

It is intended that this position statement be used in conjunction with ANA's position statement on the responsibility of the individual registered nurse to make decisions consistent with her or his ethical obligation to decline work assignments when fatigue may compromise her or his ability to deliver safe patient care, *"Assuring Patient Safety: Registered Nurses' Responsibility in All Roles and Settings to Guard Against Fatigue"* (in press).

¹ ANA, in its *Nursing's Social Policy Statement*, "recognized the importance of clearly identifying the recipients of professional nursing care, be they individuals, groups, families, communities, or populations." The *Social Policy Statement* notes that "[t]o date, professional nursing has not yet selected ... the term best depicting the healthy or ill recipients of professional nursing care." Therefore the term "patient" was selected to be used "throughout the text to provide consistency and brevity" ... and readers are asked "to keep in mind that the breadth of nursing practice always includes the various recipients of care," be they the individual, the group, the family, the community, or the population. *Nursing's Social Policy Statement (2nd edition)*, 2003, American Nurses Association, p. v & 22.

² While ANA's membership is limited to registered nurses, it is ANA's belief that employers of health care personnel have a similar obligation to these employees to establish policies and procedures regarding employee fatigue and patient safety.

History/Previous Position Statements: In 2000, the American Nurses Association (ANA) House of Delegates adopted an action “Opposing the Use of Mandatory Overtime as a Staffing Solution” (CNPE-2). Embedded in this and other statements on related issues, ANA has consistently reiterated its position that registered nurses have a responsibility to reject any work assignment that puts patients or themselves in jeopardy (1995 ANA Position Statement, “*The Right to Accept or Reject an Assignment*”). Further, ANA’s consistent position has been that such a principled rejection does not constitute “patient abandonment;” on the contrary, it is the only ethical option for the fatigued nurse.

Then, in 2004, the House of Delegates adopted a resolution entitled “Transforming the Work Environment for Nurses,” based largely on the recommendations set out in the exhaustive Institute of Medicine (IOM) report of the same year, *Keeping Patients Safe: Transforming the Work Environment of Nurses*. The report described the central role of registered nurses in protecting patient safety and achieving better patient outcomes; and it discussed the frequent mismanagement of the nurse’s work environment that often threatens these integral contributions. Among those issues highlighted in the report, the IOM focused on institutional support and structures for maintaining nurse staffing at levels sufficient to avoid patient safety issues caused by nurse fatigue.

The ANA 2005 House of Delegates overwhelmingly passed a resolution regarding the “Implications of Fatigue on Patient and Nurse Safety.” That resolution built on the above described significant work that ANA has pursued for several years linking patient safety with a host of workplace environmental and staffing factors that affect the number of hours registered nurses work. It acknowledged the impact of nurse fatigue on patient safety, quality of care and nurses, and urged individual nurses, nurse managers, nurse administrators, employers of nurses, trustees and other stakeholders to fulfill their legal and ethical obligations to assure that registered nurses’ work hours and patterns do not extend beyond the limits of safety for both nurses and patients.

Supportive Material: The 2004 IOM report, *Keeping Patients Safe: Transforming the Work Environment of Nurses*, recognized that creating a healthy work environment for registered nurses that is most conducive to patient safety will require fundamental change within a health care organization.

Strong evidence links prolonged work hours (more than 12 hours in a 24-hour span, or more than 60 hours in 7 days), rotating shifts and insufficient breaks to:

- slowed reaction time,
- lapses of attention to detail,
- errors of omission,
- compromised problem solving,
- reduced motivation, and
- decreased energy for successful completion of required tasks (IOM, 2004, p.12).

Further, Rogers, Hwang, Scott, Aiken, and Dinges (2004) found that the likelihood of making an error was three times higher when nurses worked shifts lasting 12.5 hours or more, and that

nurses, indeed, worked longer than scheduled on a daily basis, and generally worked more than 40 hours a week. Research examining consecutive hours worked by medical interns and residents also found that after extended work shifts there was an increased risk for both patient errors while at work and motor vehicle crashes leaving work (Landigan, et al., 2004; Barger, et al., 2005).

Recent research with 2,273 RNs by Trinkoff, Geiger-Brown, Brady, Lipscomb and Muntaner (2006) documented that more than half of the hospital nurses in their study typically worked 12 hours or more per day and more than 50 hours per week. Further, nurses were likely to work many days consecutively, without sufficient rest between shifts and during scheduled time off.

Excessive total hours worked puts nurses and patients at risk; in addition, *rotating* shifts can also threaten patient safety. Research by Circadian Technologies Incorporated has found that the number of accidents for all shift workers is 1.2 times greater than that for traditional workers and the resulting incremental cost to business is \$8.5 billion (BNA, 2003).

Given this risk, the individual nurse's ethical responsibility to consider her or his level of fatigue when deciding whether to accept a patient assignment is addressed in the ANA's complementary position statement, "*Registered Nurses' Responsibility in All Roles and Settings to Guard Against Working When Fatigued.*" In the present statement, "*Assuring Patient Safety: The Employers' Role in Promoting Healthy Nursing Work Hours for Registered Nurses in All Roles and Settings,*" ANA urges employers of registered nurses to acknowledge their responsibility to assure a safe workforce, and to initiate fundamental change in their staffing and salary policies so as to create incentives for a rested and safe nursing workforce.

At the institutional or organizational level, the risk that fatigue poses to both nurse and patient safety mandates that nurse managers and administrators actively promote changes in the work environment of nurses. Provision Six of the *Code of Ethics for Nurses with Interpretive Statements* clarifies:

The nurse participates in establishing, maintaining, and improving health care environments and conditions of employment conducive to the provision of quality health care and consistent with the values of the profession through individual and collective action (p. 20).

Interpretive Statement 6.3 further delineates the ethical responsibilities of nurse managers and administrators to take action to curtail extended work hours and insufficient rest time between shifts:

Acquiescing and accepting unsafe or inappropriate practices, even if the individual does not participate in the specific practice, is equivalent to condoning unsafe practice (p. 21).

Nurse managers and administrators, bound by this ethical code of practice, may feel torn by conflicting professional obligations. Hospitals and other health care entities, not similarly bound, are clearly under pressure to reduce expenses; the managers of these institutions and organizations may not recognize the connections between their budget and nurse fatigue. Their

response to market pressures has often been an "adhocracy" of registered nurse understaffing, patched with excessive overtime, expensive agency nurses and rotating shifts that further deteriorates working conditions for already overworked nurses, thereby threatening patient safety.

Administrators need to be educated to the larger costs to their institutions of nurse fatigue as well as the costs of excessive overtime and agency nurses. The most obvious cause-and-effect may be seen in the reduction of adverse patient outcomes when an adequate, appropriate, and rested nursing staff is available. Study after study has concluded that nursing care, specifically, and appropriate staffing in general, is central to improved patient outcomes. This directly affects the institution's bottom line.

For example, ANA's 2000 study, *Nurse Staffing and Patient Outcomes in the Inpatient Hospital Setting*, describes five adverse outcomes measures that respond favorably to adequate nurse staffing: hospital length of stay, nosocomial pneumonia, postoperative infections, pressure ulcers, and nosocomial urinary tract infections. Each of these might cost a hospital or health facility money that it would otherwise not spend. Appropriate nurse staffing that permits time for thorough patient assessment and timely interventions ultimately improves outcomes, and has the potential for significantly reducing these types of expensive risks.

Risks to nurses in the health care environment, only amplified by the fatigue factor, can similarly affect the cost of doing business for employers of nurses. Health care jobs are already among the most hazardous occupations. In a 2004 survey, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics noted that, of the fourteen private industry sectors with the highest reported number of cases of injury or illness, three were in the health care and social assistance sector. In fact, "hospitals and nursing and residential care facilities have *led* [italics added] the list of industries reporting [the highest number of] cases for the past two years" (p. 8). The rate of illnesses experienced by workers in the hospital industry was almost three times that of workers in private industry as a whole.

Knowing all of this, and supported by the extensive research linking human fatigue with error, institutions that persist in policies supporting a culture where overwork, understaffing and underpay are the norm may ultimately find themselves facing extensive accountability for their short-sightedness. The consequence of institutional intractability is even more stark as the evidence accumulates specifically linking nurse fatigue with errors in clinical judgment that have the potential to harm patients or nurses themselves.

Employers may begin to experience the legal implications of the mounting research on fatigue, as well. For example, a registered nurse successfully claimed workers' compensation for injuries from a motor vehicle accident that occurred when she fell asleep while driving home after working back-to-back double shifts, at the behest of her manager and against her own judgment. The court ruled in her favor because it deemed the hospital's systematic abuse of overtime as a foreseeable and avoidable cause of the accident (Deland v. Hutchings, 1994). As hospitals and other health care institutions increasingly look to *institutional systems* to assure patient safety, as opposed to a model that only looks at individual responsibility, it is possible

that courts will follow the trend in finding institutional liability for those lapses in *institutional* policy that foreseeably result in harm to patients or staff.

Institutions also accrue the secondary costs of nurse fatigue that must be paid in time, and that ultimately affect the *entire* health care system. Clearly, nurse fatigue and the factors contributing to it are not isolated from the larger issues of health care workforce and access to care. In its 2001 report, "Nursing Workforce: Emerging Nurse Shortages Due to Multiple Factors," the US General Accountability Office cites "inadequate staffing, heavy workloads, the increased use of overtime, a lack of sufficient support staff, and the adequacy of wages" as key factors in the emerging registered nurse shortage (p. 2). When all the related factors are considered, fairer wages for registered nurses may be, at a minimum, cost-neutral for hospitals and other entities.

The drive for "organizational efficiency," when its proponents fail to balance it with other values, continues to backfire in industry after industry. Increasingly, businesses must balance the cost of assuring a rested workforce against the regrettable cost of *not* having rested workers. The shift and duty times of airline pilots and truck drivers are regulated for precisely these reasons. In health care, teaching hospitals can be denied their accreditation for graduate medical education if they routinely ignore resident work hour limits. Although the application of this logic has been slow to reach the rest of the health care community, employers need to make the connection between nurse fatigue and safety of both the patient and the nurse.

The management of hospitals and other healthcare entities must be accountable for making the changes necessary to align their rewards systems with their espoused value of high quality patient care and safety. Nursing can support this mission by generating specific recommendations as to what institutions can do differently to address the factors that contribute to nurse fatigue.

Several nursing specialty organizations have addressed how their members might best balance work and rest to optimize safety, and how their employers might support their doing so. The Association of periOperative Registered Nurses (AORN), an organizational affiliate of the American Nurses Association (ANA), offers several strategies in its 2005 Position Statement on Safe Work/On-Call Practices, to promote patient and perioperative personal safety. Those strategies that directly target action by institutions and organizational systems include:

- Perioperative Registered Nurses should not be required to provide direct patient care for more than 12 consecutive hours in 24 hours and not more than 60 hours in a seven-day period.
- Off-duty periods should be scheduled to provide for an uninterrupted eight-hour sleep cycle.
- Arrangements should be made to relieve a perioperative registered nurse who has worked on-call and is scheduled to work the following shift to allow for adequate off-duty recuperation time.
- The type of facility and possible number of sustained work hours should be taken into consideration when making on-call shift assignments.

- The individual's ability to be able to meet the potential work demands should be considered when making on call assignments.
- Employers should support perioperative registered nurses to change cultural attitudes so that fatigue is recognized as an unacceptable risk to patient and worker safety rather than a sign of their dedication to their job.

AORN's full position statement and guidance statement on Safe On-Call Practices in Perioperative Practices can be found on the AORN web site at the following link: <http://www.aorn.org/about/positions/default.htm>.

The American Association of Critical Care Nurses has explored how "mental and physical fatigue can contribute to errors and 'near-misses' with medications and case-related procedures" in its position statement opposing mandatory overtime. Without the ability to resort to mandatory overtime, "hospitals and health care institutions will have to look at real remedies for understaffed facilities, such as: 1) hiring more RN's, and 2) utilizing strategies to recruit and retain more nurses" (<http://www.aacn.org/AACN/pubpolcy.nsf/vwdoc/pmp>, ¶ 7).

A 2006 study by Scott, Rogers, Hwang and Zhang targeted at this critical care nursing population generally affirms earlier studies, showing respondents "worked longer [hours] than scheduled and for extended periods," and that "longer work duration increased the risk of error and near error and decreased nurses' vigilance" (p. 1). It also supports the IOM's recommendations to minimize the use of 12-hour shifts and to limit nurses' working hours to 12 consecutive hours during any one 24-hour period. The authors were particularly persuaded by the potentially dire consequences of a fatigue-induced mistake in critical care, where "patients are not only exposed to more medications and treatments than are patients in general care areas but are also seriously ill, with little natural resilience or ability to defend themselves from the consequences of healthcare mishaps" (Scott, 2006, p. 1).

This evidence, highlighting the detrimental effects of nurse fatigue on patient and nurse safety, as well as on institutional and organizational accountability, leads ANA to recommend the following actions for registered nurses, employers, researchers and educators.

Recommendations: As a means of implementing this position statement, the ANA recommends the following eleven specific actions:

Practicing Registered Nurses:

1. Individual registered nurses should consistently exercise their ethical obligations as articulated in the ANA's position statement on *Registered Nurses' Responsibility in All Roles and Settings to Guard Against Working When Fatigued* (ANA, *in press*).
2. Nurse managers and administrators have a responsibility to examine and institute scheduling practices that promote safe work hours, adequate break time, and minimal rotation of shifts.

Employers/Health Care Agencies:

3. All employers should provide fair compensation that encourages the elimination of the need for such strategies as excessive overtime or rotating shifts. The ANA recommends a thorough examination of overtime pay expenditures and a reassignment of those dollars toward both the additional staff necessary to eliminate overtime and subsequent increases in registered nurses' base compensation. These steps should be cooperatively pursued and negotiated in an open and equitable process that includes both registered nurses and healthcare administrators.
4. Registered nurses' salaries must be adjusted to appropriately reflect their education, training, experience and the value they add within the health care entity for which they work. In particular, "wage compression," or the stagnation of salary growth relatively early in a nurse's career, should be eliminated and experience rewarded so that the health care system retains its nursing workforce. Salaries should be such that registered nurses do not feel compelled to seek supplemental income through rotating shifts, overtime and other voluntary practices that contribute to worker fatigue.
5. All employers of health professionals should provide ongoing education to employees concerning the impact of consecutive and total hours worked and employee fatigue on patient safety, quality of care, and the personal safety of employees.
6. Employers should institute policies, including whistleblower protections, permitting the free exchange of ideas and information about staffing and quality of care issues among their staff without fear of reprisal or retribution.
7. Employers should adopt as official policy, the position that registered nurses have the right to accept or reject a work assignment based on fatigue; that such rejection does not constitute patient abandonment; and that registered nurses should not suffer adverse consequences in retaliation for rejecting in good faith a work assignment based on fatigue.
8. Employers should have a system in place for evaluating instances of registered nurses rejecting assignments in order to evaluate causes and effectiveness of staffing patterns.

Education:

9. Schools of Nursing should add to their curricula information on the impact of hours worked, rotating shifts, and neglecting to take meal and rest breaks on patient safety and harm to self and peers. In addition, the ethical obligation of the individual registered nurse to monitor fatigue and to decline assignments that put patients at risk should be

stressed, relying on Provisions and Interpretive Statements from the *Code of Ethics for Nurses* (ANA, 2001).

10. Academic education and training programs for health care administrators should include curricula content regarding the impact of nurse and health care worker fatigue on patient and staff safety, and the importance of supporting a healthy workplace for registered nurses and other employees.

Research:

11. ANA should partner with specialty nursing organizations and other stakeholders to assure that the following subjects are included on the research agendas of various funding entities:

- Determinants of registered nurse fatigue
- Impact of nurse fatigue on the health and well-being of nurses
- Impact of registered nurse fatigue on patient safety
- Patient classification/acute systems
- Staffing patterns and nursing-sensitive patient outcomes
- Salaried registered nurse-staffing models

12. Schools of Nursing, as well as Schools of Public Health, Occupational Health, Health Services Research and Economics, should develop graduate research foci around the areas of patient acuity, nurse staffing patterns, nurse fatigue and quality of care.

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