

Addressing Unsafe Practice Situations

Published: *March 2023*

What Is Meant by Unsafe Practice Situations?

Unsafe practice situations are circumstances in which the obligation of the nurse to provide safe, competent, ethical care and service cannot be fulfilled.

Unsafe practice situations can occur for multiple reasons. It could be a result of poor communication and teamwork (Blair et al., 2020; Blair et al., 2022), inadequate staffing (Blair et al., 2020; Blair et al., 2022), inappropriate staff mix decisions, outdated or inadequate policies and procedures (Blair et al., 2020), inappropriate or inadequate supplies and equipment, workplace conflict, disruptive behaviour (Health Quality Council of Alberta, 2013) or workplace harassment¹ or violence², a lack of support and resources (Blair et al., 2020; Blair et al., 2022), or a culture of blame and fear of retribution (Blair et al., 2020).

What Is the Registrant's Role in Addressing Unsafe Practice Situations?

The goal of nursing practice is to provide safe, competent, ethical care and service to the public. As changes in the health-care system evolve, nurses in all settings and roles face the challenges of reduced staff and budgets, meeting increasingly acute and complex client needs, and changing roles and responsibilities of health-care providers.

¹ "Harassment" means any single incident or repeated incidents of objectionable or unwelcome conduct, comment, bullying or action by a person that the person knows or ought reasonably to know will or would cause offence or humiliation to a worker, or adversely affect the worker's health and safety. See the full definition as defined in the *Occupational Health and Safety Act (2020)*.

² "Violence", whether at a work site or work-related, means the threatened, attempted or actual conduct of a person that causes or is likely to cause physical or psychological injury or harm, and includes domestic or sexual violence. (*Occupational Health and Safety Act, 2020*)

With many factors that impact patient safety, registrants³ play an important role in addressing threats to safety and to the delivery of quality care to clients. Registrants do so by:

- following current and relevant legislation and regulations;
- meeting expectations in the CRNA standards, and following directions in guidelines, and other regulatory guidance;
- following policies and employer requirements relevant to their practice setting;
- questioning policies and procedures inconsistent with therapeutic client outcomes, best practices and safety standards;
- communicating effectively and respectfully with clients, essential care partners, and with other members of the health-care team to enhance client care and safety outcomes;
- intervening, reporting and addressing unsafe, non-compassionate, unethical or incompetent practice or conditions that interfere with the registrant's ability to provide safe, ethical and quality care and supporting those who do the same.

By addressing threats to safety and the delivery of quality care to clients, registrants advocate for safe, competent and ethical nursing care, and contribute to establishing practice environments that have the organizational and human support systems and the necessary resource allocations. They promote a safe practice environment that contributes to healthy teams and therapeutic client outcomes.

Purpose

Registrants are responsible and accountable for their own practice and conduct. When unsafe practice situations arise, registrants question, intervene and report threats to both safety and the delivery of quality care to clients. The *Practice Standards for Registrants (2023)* and the *Code of Ethics for Registered Nurses (Canadian Nurses Association, 2017)* provide a foundation for registrants to understand their responsibilities and accountabilities regarding unsafe practice situations.

The purpose of this document is to provide a framework that can be used by registrants to address actual or perceived threats to safety and the delivery of quality care to clients.

³ The term “registrants” includes registered nurses (RNs), graduate nurses, certified graduate nurses, nurse practitioners (NPs), graduate nurse practitioners, and RN or NP courtesy registrants on the CRNA registry.

| Steps to Address Unsafe Practice Situations | Questions for Registrants to Consider |
|---|---|
| Step 1: Identify the Concern | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ What is the concern? ▪ Why is it a concern? ▪ What are the implications for client outcomes and safety? ▪ What evidence is there that an issue exists (e.g., safety incidents reports or hazards, close calls and adverse events reports)? ▪ Are other organizations, institutions or agencies concerned about this? Why? |
| Step 2: Assess the Environment | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Who else does this concern impact (e.g., other professionals, the public)? ▪ How could you work with others in addressing the concern? ▪ What factors are impacting the concern (e.g., economic, social, interpersonal, government or regional policy, administrative policy or philosophy, etc.)? ▪ How are decisions made? ▪ Who makes decisions? ▪ What resources do you have? ▪ Who is the most appropriate person to take the concern to? ▪ Are there committees in the organization, institution or agency that should address concerns of this nature? Are RNs or NPs on such committees? |
| Step 3: Document the Concern | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ State objective facts, dates, times, place, setting, and people involved in the situation. |



| Steps to Address Unsafe Practice Situations | Questions for Registrants to Consider |
|---|--|
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Provide your professional assessment or observation of specific outcomes or consequences for the client. ▪ If the concern is related to staffing or staff mix decisions, the CRNA's <i>Coordination of Client Care Guidelines (2022)</i> can be used as a framework for identification and documentation of the concern. ▪ Document the concern when it is identified and keep a personal copy. ▪ Document all conversations, meetings, and decisions made in relation to the concern according to employer requirements. |
| Step 4: Plan Your Course of Action | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Gather information and documentation to support your concern and course of action. ▪ Identify potential strategies to address the concern. ▪ Analyze the “pros” and “cons” of each strategy. ▪ Develop a plan of action. ▪ Work together with those involved to address the concern. |
| Step 5: Implement and Evaluate Your Plan | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Decide the most appropriate supervisory or management level at which to address the problem - begin with your immediate supervisor and proceed as necessary. |



| Steps to Address Unsafe Practice Situations | Questions for Registrants to Consider |
|---|---|
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Evaluate each part of the plan as you implement it. ▪ Questions to ask: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Is this approach effective - why or why not? ○ Is more information needed? ○ Are other resources needed? ○ Do any of the steps of the action plan need to be repeated? |

Resources That Can Be Accessed

- CRNA standards, guidelines and other regulatory guidance such as in advice to the profession documents
- CRNA policy and practice consultants, who can help define concerns, identify appropriate resources, and support registrants in problem solving (1-800-252-9392 or practice@nurses.ab.ca)
- Policies and procedures in the practice setting
- The Canadian Nurses Protective Society for any questions regarding liability (1-800-267-3390 or www.cnps.ca)

References

Blair, W., Courtney-Pratt, H., Doran, E., & Kable, A. (2022). Nurses’ recognition and response to unsafe practice by their peers: A qualitative descriptive analysis. *Nurse Education in Practice*, 63, 1-6. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nepr.2022.103387>

Blair, W., Kable, A., Palazzi, K., Courtney-Pratt, H., Doran, E., & Oldmeadow, C. (2020). Nurses’ perspectives of recognising and responding to unsafe practice by their peers: A national cross-sectional survey. *Journal of Clinical Nursing*, 30(7-8), 1168-1183.

Canadian Nurses Association. (2017). *Code of ethics for registered nurses*. <https://www.cna-aiic.ca/en/nursing/regulated-nursing-in-canada/nursing-ethics>



College of Registered Nurses of Alberta. (2023). *Practice Standards for Registrants*.

Health Quality Council of Alberta. (2013). *Managing disruptive behaviour in the healthcare workplace: Provincial framework*. https://hqca.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/HQCA_Disruptive_Behaviour_Framework_041113.pdf

Occupational Health and Safety Act, SA 2020, c O-2.2.

