

Interpretive Statement

Revised – 10/18/11

Title:	Patient Abandonment	Number: NCIS 1.0
References:	Regulation of Health Professions – Uniform Disciplinary Act (RCW 18.130) http://apps.leg.wa.gov/RCW/default.aspx?cite=18.130 Violations of Standards of Nursing Conduct or Practice (WAC 246-840-710): http://apps.leg.wa.gov/WAC/default.aspx?cite=246-840-710 Nursing Care – (RCW 18.79) http://apps.leg.wa.gov/RCW/default.aspx?cite=18.79&full=true	
Contact:	Deborah Carlson, RN, MSN – Nurse Practice Advisor	
Phone:	(360) 236-4725	
Email:	debbie.carlson@doh.wa.gov	
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Approved By:	Nursing Care Quality Assurance Commission	

Statement

Nurse Technicians, Licensed Practical Nurses, Registered Nurses, and Advanced Registered Nurse Practitioners who abandon patients are in violation of the *Standards of Nursing Conduct of Practice*, WAC 246-840-700. The Nursing Care Quality Assurance Commission (Commission) concludes that patient abandonment occurs when a nurse, who has established a nurse-patient relationship, leaves the patient assignment without transferring or discharging nursing care in a timely manner. This applies in any health care setting; it applies to paid or unpaid nursing care. Employee problems do not constitute patient abandonment.

Background

The Commission establishes, monitors, and enforces standards of practice, RCW 18.79.010. The Commission interprets that a nurse-patient relationship begins when the nurse accepts assignment for nursing care. Assignment includes the patient care functions that the nurse is responsible to perform. A person authorized to administer, supervise, or direct the nurse may make the assignment. A nurse may accept a patient assignment based on professional judgment or through a contractual relationship. The *Uniform Disciplinary Act* (UDA), RCW 18.130, describes procedures for discipline. The Commission gets many complaints about employee problems. These are not subject to discipline by the Commission.

In compliance with WAC 246-840-700, transferring nursing care must include reporting (oral or written) of the patient’s condition, circumstances, and care needs to an appropriate caregiver. As defined in RCW 18.79.260, an appropriate caregiver is a licensed health professional whose scope of practice and qualifications permit transferring functions and responsibilities. In some settings, the nurse may also transfer care to an appropriate family member or other designated caregiver in some settings. The caregiver must accept the transfer of care and understand the report.

Examples of Patient Abandonment	Examples of Employee Problems
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ending a contractual relationship as the primary provider • Leaving an emergency situation • Leaving the patient care setting • Leaving the patient in an unsafe situation to give care to an unassigned patient • Failing to report suspected abuse or neglect • Sleeping on duty • Giving care while impaired • Giving care incompetently • Delegating care to an unqualified caregiver • Failing to supervise staff carrying out delegated tasks • Failing to give appropriate care • Failing to perform assigned patient responsibilities • Failing to give appropriate information when transferring or discharging care • Failing to notify an appropriate person about significant changes • Failing to communicate or document information 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Failing to call in, show up, or arrive late for an assigned shift • Refusing to work, refusing to work extra hours, or not returning from, a scheduled absence • Resigning at the end of a shift, without advanced notice, or not working the remaining posted work schedule • Refusing to work in a setting because of inadequate orientation, education, training, or experience • Refusing to work in an unsafe situation • Refusing to perform care that may be harmful to the patient • Refusing to delegate a task to an unsafe caregiver • Refusing an assignment because of ethical, religious, or cultural reasons

Conclusion

Patient abandonment violates the *Standards of Nursing Conduct of Practice*, WAC 246-840-700. This occurs when:

- The nurse establishes a nurse-patient relationship by accepting a nursing assignment, and
- The nurse ends the nurse-patient relationship without transferring or discharging responsibilities to an appropriate caregiver in a timely manner.

Examples help explain the difference between patient abandonment and employee problems of which the Commission does not have authority over.