

A FRAMEWORK FOR
MANAGING
PROFESSIONAL
PRACTICE PROBLEMS

NURSES ASSOCIATION
OF NEW BRUNSWICK



OUR MANDATE

The Nurses Association of New Brunswick is a professional organization that exists to protect the public and to support nurses by promoting and maintaining standards for nursing education and practice, and by advocating for healthy public policy.

The Nurses Association of New Brunswick endorses the principles of self-regulation, that is, promoting good practice, preventing poor practice and intervening when practice is unacceptable.

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1. MANAGING PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE PROBLEMS

The goal of nursing practice is to achieve the best possible health outcome for the client, with no unnecessary exposure to risk or harm. Nurses are accountable for decisions that are consistent with safe, competent, and ethical practice. As employees, nurses have a responsibility to work in accordance with accepted standards, and to appropriately inform their employer when unable to meet those standards. Nurses also have a responsibility “to respond to and report professional practice problems and promote a practice environment that supports professional responsibility and accountability” (*Standards of Practice for Registered Nurses, 2005*). In responding to potentially unsafe work situations, each nurse is expected to consider the specific circumstances of the situation, the professional obligations as well as any contractual obligations with the employer (NANB & NBNU, 2007).

This document offers a framework to support RNs in meeting this responsibility.

What is a professional practice problem?

A professional practice problem is distinguishable from employment or personal problems in the workplace. Problems of a professional practice nature are identified as any situation in the workplace that:

- has or could place clients at risk;
- interferes with a nurse’s ability to practice in accordance with the *Standards of Practice for Registered Nurses*, the *Code of Ethics for Registered Nurses*, *Nurses Act* or other legislation, workplace policies, procedures or other relevant standards and guidelines; and
- is beyond the ability of an individual nurse to resolve.

Examples of professional practice problems are:

- staffing that is inadequate in number, education or experience;
- lack of written policies to provide direction for nursing practice;
- lack of appropriate supplies or equipment;
- lack of access to essential medical or other health care professionals;
- inadequate communication/documentation systems to support decision-making about client care; and
- conflict between professionals.

2. FRAMEWORK FOR ACTION

The following framework details a four-step process that will assist RNs to identify, evaluate, communicate and resolve professional practice problems.

STEP I: Identify/verify the problem

The following can help nurses isolate and clarify the professional practice problem:

- Does the situation present risks to clients? If yes, what specifically are the risks or potential impacts if the situation is not corrected?
- Does the situation interfere with the nurse's ability to practice according to established professional or workplace standards, policies/procedures, guidelines? Which ones specifically: *Standards of Practice for Registered Nurses, Code of Ethics for Registered Nurses, Nurses Act* or other relevant legislation, specific workplace policies/procedures?
- Does the situation interfere with the nurse's ability to act competently?
- Is this a recurring situation?
- Are there common factors contributing to the situation and if so, what are they: people, settings, situations?
 - Do other RNs think that corrective measures are needed?
 - Does the absence of a workplace policy/procedure/guideline contribute to this problem?

STEP II: Communicate the problem

Once a professional practice problem has been confirmed, the established lines of communication in the workplace must be used to communicate the problem so that it can be reviewed and action taken to address the issue. What follows is a suggested course of action:

- contact immediate manager/supervisor to discuss the problem;
- present the facts and explain concerns, in the context of what is believed poses a risk to clients and/or impedes the ability to practice according to established standards;
- categorize the practice problem as one of the following: competence, documentation, standards, staffing, leadership, policies/procedures, communication, legal/ethical issues, professional responsibility/accountability, physical plant, equipment/supplies,
- support concerns with relevant information; and
- offer to participate in resolving the situation.

STEP III: Document the problem

In follow up to discussion on the issue, prepare a detailed written statement describing the:

- situation and factors that contribute to making it a professional practice problem;
- date, time, place and who was involved;
- impact, or potential impact, on clients and/or on nursing practice;
- standards, policies/procedure or guidelines which were not being met;
- actions taken in relation to the problem; and
- resolution/corrective action proposed.

Workplaces may have designated forms for this purpose such as incident or variance reports. Where these exist, a nurse should use these forms to document the situation. If there are no such reporting tools in the workplace, then a letter or memo format (see sample in appendix) is appropriate. A nurse may choose to complete the workplace form and enclose additional documentation through a letter or memo. Ensure that written communication is signed, dated, marked confidential and includes a request for a response by a specific date, which is reasonable when considering the degree of urgency of the problem.

NOTE: Remember to keep a copy of this correspondence for your records.

If a nurse does not receive a response by the requested date, inquire as to what progress is being made. If action is not being taken:

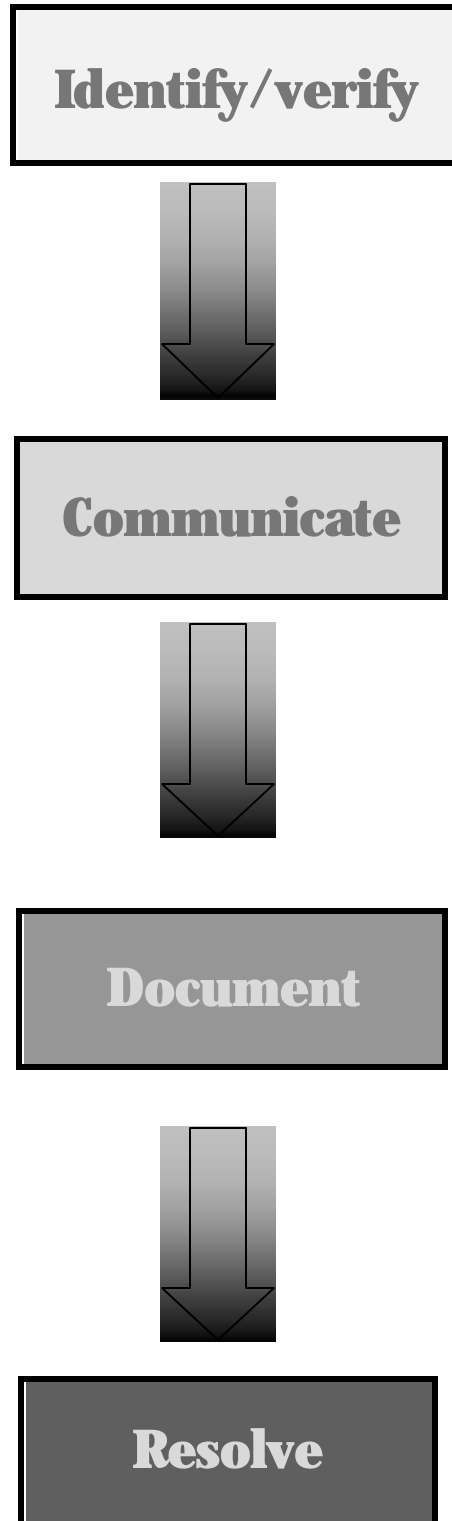
- send a second letter/memo to the same individual, stating this is in follow up to the earlier letter, which is enclosed in this correspondence; forward copies to the next highest level of management in the organization (this would normally be the individual to whom immediate manager/supervisor reports) and ensure a copy of this correspondence is kept on record; and
- keep a detailed record of all conversations and written communications surrounding this issue, actions/decisions taken and any results.

STEP IV: Resolve the problem

- Participate in resolving the problem. Suggest appropriate resources and propose constructive solutions.
- Professional practice problems should be communicated and documented each time they occur. Continue to communicate your concerns if clients continue to be at risk or professional practice standards are violated, and work constructively until the problem is resolved.
 - If a nurse has exhausted all channels within their organization and the problem has still not been resolved, contact an NANB Practice Advisor/ Consultant to receive more information on how to approach the problem for resolution at 1 800 442-4417/(506)458-8731
 - The registered nurse may also involve the New Brunswick Nurses Union, if it is appropriate to do so.

The following flow chart outlines the four (4) step process.

Responding to professional practice problems: 4 steps



RESOURCES

Publications

The following documents or resources may be of assistance in managing Professional practice problems:

- *Nurses Act*,(1984)
http://www.nanb.nb.ca/pdf_e/Publications/General_Publications/NursesAct_E&F.pdf
- Code of Ethics for Registered Nurses (CNA, 2008)
http://www.nanb.nb.ca/pdf_e/Publications/General_Publications/CNA%20Code%20of%20Ethics.pdf
- *Standards of Practice for Registered Nurses*(NANB, 2005)
http://www.nanb.nb.ca/pdf_e/Publications/General_Publications/Standards_ofRegisteredNursesE.pdf
- *Working Understaffed: Professional and Legal Considerations* (NANB and NBNU, 2007)
http://www.nanb.nb.ca/pdf_e/Publications/General_Publications/Working%20Understaffed%20Brochure.pdf
- *Framework for a Quality Professional Practice Environment for Registered Nurses*(NANB, 2005)
http://www.nanb.nb.ca/pdf_e/Publications/Position_Statements/POSITION_STATEMENTS_PDF/FrameworkQualityProfessinalPracticeEnvE.pdf
- *Patient Safety* (CNA, 2004)
http://www.nanb.nb.ca/pdf_e/Publications/Position_Statements/POSITION_STATEMENTS_PDF/CNAPatientSafetyE.pdf
- Workplace Policies and Procedures

Other NANB documents can be obtained online at www.nanb.nb.ca.

CONSULTATIONS

- Contact an NANB Practice Advisor/Consultants for support in defining the problem, the appropriate resources and approach for problem resolution (1 800 42-4417/(506)458-8731 or by email at nanb@nanb.nb.ca)
- Canadian Nurses Protective Society for free consultation on legal/liability issues (1 800 267-3390)

APPENDIX A: Sample Correspondence

CONFIDENTIAL

Date (day/month/year)

Jane Doe, RN

Program Manager, Surgery

ABC Health Authority

Somewhere, NB

Dear Ms. Doe:

This letter is in follow up to our discussion on (date) concerning the professional practice problem related to (specify the situation) with the (give specifics as to where this problem is evident, for example, the specific program/unit).

I have observed (been witness to/experienced) the following..... (detail the issue) on (where, when, who was present/involved).

This is a recurring problem which, if left unresolved, poses a risk to clients by... (details) -or- compromises nurses' ability to practice according to professional standards (specify which ones)/workplace policy/procedure (specify which ones).

I am requesting that(specify what action is expected to be required) be taken to bring a quick resolution to this problem -or- that the Professional Practice Committee review and propose a solution to this problem.

I would appreciate a response by (date) relative to the action being taken to respond to my concerns.

Thank you for your assistance in this matter. I look forward to the opportunity, where possible, to participate in the resolution of this professional practice problem.

Sincerely,

REFERENCES

Canadian Nurses Association (2008). *The Code of Ethics for Registered Nurses*. Ottawa: Author

Nurses Association of New Brunswick (2005). *Standards of Practice for Registered Nurses*. Fredericton: Author.

Nurses Association of New Brunswick and New Brunswick Nurses Union (2007). *Working Understaffed: Professional and Legal Considerations*. Fredericton: Author