

By VIRGIL GUITARD

YOU'VE ASKED

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“I’m a registered nurse (RN) working in maternity/child health. I’ve been asked to ‘float’ to an unfamiliar nursing unit. What are my professional responsibilities?”

Employers and nurses have an important role to play in organizing staffing that will ensure the provision of safe nursing care. In order to meet this responsibility, the employer may from time to time, request that a nurse ‘floats’ in areas other than their regular unit. When you are requested to float to an unfamiliar unit, your responsibility and accountability are to carefully assess whether you have the knowledge, skills and judgment needed to provide safe, competent and ethical nursing care to the clients.

The Code of Ethics for Registered Nurses (2008), states under the value of “Being Accountable”: Nurses practice within the limits of their competence. When aspects of care are beyond their level of competence, they seek additional information of knowledge; seek help from their supervisor or a competent practitioner and/or request a different work assignment. In the meantime, nurses remain with the person receiving care until another nurse is available.

The following actions would assist the nurse when ‘floating’ to an unfamiliar unit:

1. ensure that the supervisor/manager making the decision is aware of the workload on the unit;
2. in case of an inappropriate and unsafe assignment, discuss your concerns with the nurse in charge and negotiate an appropriate assignment based on your experience or limitations;
3. familiarize yourself with the unit (i.e. equipment, supplies and so forth) upon arrival;
4. ensure that you have identified the appropriate person to contact if you have any problems or questions; and
5. if your assignment remains inappropriate and unsafe for patients after the above steps have been followed, refer to the Nurses Association of New Brunswick’s *Framework for Managing Professional Practice Problems* (2009).

What are my responsibilities as a nurse manager?

As a nurse manager, you are responsible for staffing your unit with sufficient numbers of registered nurses and support staff who are competent to provide the required nursing care, taking into consideration clients’ needs and the practice setting.

Registered nurses are accountable for the care they provide.

When the RN does not have the required competencies to carry out a specific assignment, it would be best to jointly identify with the RN assignment options. The Nurses Association of New Brunswick’s *Standards of Practice for Registered Nurse* (2005) indicates under Standard 2, “Knowledge-Based Practice” that each RN demonstrates competencies relevant to own area of nursing practice and practices within own level of competence.

As the nurse manager, you should examine how the RN can best utilize her/his own competence as an adjunct to existing staffing. Considering a buddy approach—assigning the RN with an experienced RN is an example of an approach that can provide support in meeting the care needs of clients.

For more information on this topic or on any other nursing practice situations, please contact NANB’s Practice Advisor at 1 800 442-4417 or by email at nanb@nanb.nb.ca. ■

REFERENCES

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- Canadian Nurses Association (2008). *Code of Ethics for Registered Nurses*. Ottawa: Author.
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- Nurses Association of New Brunswick and New Brunswick Nurses Union (2007). *Working Understaffed: Professional and Legal Consideration*. Fredericton: Author