

Working Alone

Nurses who are required to work are at an increased risk of becoming victims of workplace violence. In some instances, nurses are working alone due to staffing cutbacks or in the case of home care nurses working alone is considered as part of their work. Nurses who do home visits are at risk not only because they are working alone they are also working in an unfamiliar and uncontrolled environment.

What are the risks of working alone with patients?

When working alone, nurses face the risk of violence for many reasons:

- ▲ Nature of medical procedures can make patients nervous, agitated etc.
- ▲ Working alone in remote locations (includes within a hospital or clinic), patient homes, in the community etc.
- ▲ Availability of drugs at hospitals or clinics
- ▲ Uncontrolled public access to most areas of a hospital or clinic
- ▲ Provision of services to the public 24 hours a day (high risk times are late night and early morning)

What are your rights?

Part 28 of the Alberta Occupational Health and Safety Code sets out the working alone requirements that your employer must abide by. These requirements apply when both of the following conditions are met:

1. A worker is working by herself or himself, and
2. Assistance is not readily available to the worker if there is an emergency or the worker is injured or ill.

Three factors must be assessed when determining if assistance is “readily available”:

1. Awareness – will other persons capable of providing assistance be aware of the worker’s needs (can another person hear you or see you)?
2. Willingness – is it reasonable to expect that those other persons will provide helpful assistance?
3. Timeliness – will assistance be provided within a reasonable period of time?

If you have nurses working alone in your workplace your employer must:

- ▲ Conduct a hazard assessment – Employers must examine the workplace and work process to identify existing or potential safety hazards. The fact that there have been no previous incidents is no excuse for not taking action.

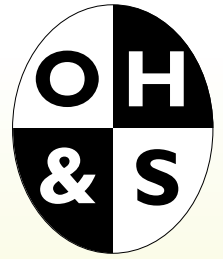
- ▲ Eliminate or reduce the risks – the best way to eliminate the risk is to have nurses working alone only when there is no other option.
- ▲ Establish an effective means of communication – The system must be appropriate to the hazards involved in the work environment and work practices.
- ▲ Ensure employees are trained and educated – Employer must be made aware of the hazards of working alone and the preventative steps taken to reduce or eliminate these risks.

What works?

- ▲ Access to high risk areas (emergency, clinics etc) should be strictly controlled
- ▲ Each patient should be assessed for the potential for violent behavior.
- ▲ If the patient has a history of threatening or violent behavior arrange to have the patient attend the clinic or home care office when other staff are on site.
- ▲ Establish an effective check-in procedure when doing home visits.
- ▲ Ask a colleague to come with you if something makes you feel uneasy – trust your instincts!
- ▲ Always take note of the entrances and exists at the patient home.
- ▲ Never take your shoes off during a home visit and keep what you carry into the home at a minimum – only what you need.
- ▲ If possible maintain a “reactionary gap” between yourself and the patient.
- ▲ If referring to written material, bring two copies so that you can sit across from the patient not beside them.
- ▲ When appropriate, demand that your employer provide you with self-defense training.

What can you do!

- ▲ Ensure that your employer has an effective working alone policy and procedure.
- ▲ Contact your UNA representative if you are working alone and do not feel safe.
- ▲ Fill out a UNA OH&S form to report any unsafe situation or incident when working alone.



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