

# Identifying Impairment in the Workplace



# Identifying Impairment In The Workplace

## Introduction

Research indicates that 10% - 15% of all health care professionals will suffer from substance abuse<sup>1</sup> or impairment at some point in their careers. Due to the recent changes in health care, as well as the ever increasing workloads and stress, further evidence suggests those numbers are on the rise. Impaired health care professionals pose a significant risk to patient safety. As a result, health care professionals must identify impairment in the workplace. This course will provide nurses with insight on how to effectively identify impairment in the workplace in order to ensure patient safety.

## Section 1: Observing Impairment

You are a nurse working in a hospital setting. You have been working on the same unit for the past six years. Recently, your hospital has hired some new nurses to work on your unit. You are excited to meet them and eager to work alongside them. The new nurses are introduced to the health care team, trained and begin working independently after their training is complete. At first, all of the new nurses are working out quite well. They are fast learners and display excellent bedside manner. Your colleagues and your managers are pleased with their addition to the nursing team and everyone is getting along great. You, too, are happy to be working with the new nurses and you are looking forward to developing engaging professional relationships with each of them. Everything continues to go smoothly for the first four months. The nurses have progressed in their skills and have not had any major problems getting along with the rest of the hospital team. However, one new nurse's behavior begins to stand out. Over the course of a few weeks, you observe the new nurse exhibiting odd and questionable behavior. At first, the questionable behavior is subtle and seems to come out of nowhere, but as time progresses, you notice the nurse's behavior becomes more and more questionable, odd and erratic. The new nurse is often late for work, moody, irritable, anxious, forgetful, disorganized, exhibits slurred speech at times and her work performance has declined in the past weeks. You are not sure what to make of your observations but you hope the nurse's

behavior is temporary. Unfortunately, it is not. Over the next few weeks you continue to observe the nurse in question exhibiting odd behavior and you notice the odd behavior seems to be progressing. In addition, supplies have gone missing and often medication counts are off during the nurse's shift. You are starting to become increasingly concerned and you start to feel uncomfortable at work. It is clear to you now that the new nurse's behavior is not temporary and you fear she may be impaired due to substance abuse. However, you are not sure what to do or how to proceed in getting her help. All you can do is ask yourself, what do I do next?

Scenarios like the one outlined above are all too common in health care settings. Often health care professionals find themselves in situations where they observe their colleagues displaying impaired behavior, which can refer to any behavior that exhibits signs and/or symptoms of substance abuse. Unfortunately, health care professionals are not immune to substance abuse problems. In fact, it is quite the opposite. Due to the stress associated with the health care profession and the availability of drugs, substance abuse is often observed among health care professionals. With that said, the question is, what should a health care professional do if he or she observes a fellow health care professional exhibiting impaired behavior? Regrettably, for some health care professionals, answering that question is not an easy task.

Often in health care settings, health care professionals establish strong bonds with one another. These bonds are typically built upon years of professional etiquette, hard work, triumphs, tribulations, friendship and teamwork. Due to the nature of the profession, health care professionals must often work together as a cohesive team to administer effective and efficient health care. Health care professionals must trust and rely on each other as well as work seamlessly with one another, in often difficult situations and under trying conditions, on a daily basis. Over time, the professional necessities of the health care field strengthen the already established bonds between fellow health care professionals, making it that much harder to answer the proposed question: what should a health care professional do if he or she observes a fellow health care professional exhibiting impaired behavior?

Observing a fellow health care professional displaying impaired behavior and considering how to proceed can be a difficult and challenging endeavor. However, health care professionals must recognize their primary obligation as a health care professional when doing so. The primary responsibility of a health care professional is to administer safe and effective health care to patients in need. Therefore, the primary obligation of a health care professional is to patient safety and the individual

patients. Thus, health care professionals must take action when they observe fellow health care professionals exhibiting impaired behavior and/or physical signs and symptoms of impairment. Failure to act could have dire consequences for patients and patient safety. The relevance of the last concept can be observed in the following example. In 2013, a New Hampshire health care professional was sentenced to 39 years in prison for infecting patients with hepatitis C. The health care professional in question, who was diagnosed with hepatitis C and was a suspected substance abuser, allegedly stole injectable painkillers and replaced them with saline-filled syringes tainted with his own blood, which led to the transmission of hepatitis C to dozens of patients across the country. The incident almost triggered a national health crisis and put a spotlight on the importance of identifying health care professionals with substance abuse problems.

Substance abuse problems are not unique to the health care profession. Many professional fields deal with the same issue - however, health care professionals have a higher level of responsibility than most professions. Health care professionals' decisions and actions directly affect individual's lives, health and overall well-being. Therefore, health care professionals must be held at a higher standard when compared to other professionals and they must help identify fellow health care professionals with potential impairment issues. The incident outlined in the previous example was horrendous. Dozens of patients' health and lives were dramatically impacted by the poor decisions and actions of one individual. However, it could have been much worse. The individual was identified and removed from the health care system before any more harm was done to unsuspecting patients. Identifying impaired health care professionals with potential substance abuse problems is a necessary component of health care professionals' obligation to the patients they serve. Patients seek health care to improve their health, not diminish it. Impaired health care professionals pose a very real threat to patients' health, quality of life and overall well-being. Therefore, they must be identified and offered help before they can cause serious harm to the very patients they are there to serve. With that said, the original question is once again posed: what should a health care professional do if he or she observes a fellow health care professional exhibiting impaired behavior? The healthcare professional should follow the 3 Rs of identifying impairment in the workplace: **Reason, Recognize, Report**. The remainder of this course will examine the 3 Rs of identifying impairment, while providing insight on how the 3 Rs uphold patient safety.

## Section 1: Summary

Health care professionals often find themselves in situations where they can observe impairment in the workplace. Impaired health care professionals can dramatically impact patients' safety, health, quality of life and overall well-being. Therefore, observed impairment in the workplace should not be ignored. Health care professionals must understand their primary obligation is to their patients, and as a result, they must strive to identify impairment in the workplace. Health care professionals must also understand that effectively identifying impairment in the workplace can safeguard patient safety. To effectively identify impairment in the workplace, health care professionals should follow the 3 Rs of identifying impairment in the workplace: Reason, Recognize, Report.

### Section 1: Key Concepts

- Impaired behavior may be observed among health care professionals.
- The primary responsibility of a health care professional is to administer safe and effective health care to patients in need. Therefore, the primary obligation of a health care professional is to patient safety and the individual patients.
- It is important to identify impairment in the workplace.
- Health care professionals should follow the 3 Rs of identifying impairment in the workplace: Reason, Recognize, Report.

### Section 1: Key Term

Impaired behavior - refers to any behavior which exhibits signs and/or symptoms of substance abuse.

### Section 1: Personal Reflection Question

Why is it important for health care professionals to identify impairment in the workplace?

## Section 2: Reason

Health care professionals should follow the 3 Rs of identifying impairment in the workplace: Reason, Recognize, Report. The first of the 3 Rs stands for Reason, or more specifically, to understand the reasons why it is important to identify impairment in the workplace. There are several reasons why it is important for health care professionals to identify impairment in the workplace. However, the most important one is the moral obligation health care professionals have to their patients. As previously mentioned, the primary obligation of health care professionals is to their patients. This moral obligation is cemented and held firmly in place by the oaths health care professionals take upon graduation. When health care professionals take oaths they agree to follow a specific set of ethical standards. These ethical standards provide a moral guide for health care professionals to follow in their daily practice. Although health care professionals from different disciplines take different professional oaths, there are common moral concepts within these varying oaths which link them together to unite all health care professionals under the same moral principles. Two of these moral concepts which stand out and directly apply to identifying impairment in the workplace include: beneficence and nonmaleficence.

### Beneficence and Nonmaleficence

Beneficence and nonmaleficence have specific meanings when they apply to health care. Beneficence can refer to the act of doing what is best for the patient<sup>2</sup>, while nonmaleficence can refer to inflicting no harm to patients; do no harm to patients<sup>2</sup>. These two moral concepts work together to ensure patient safety and are included in most health care professional oaths. Therefore, when health care professionals take their respective oaths they are bound to these moral concepts when administering health care and working in health care settings, which means health care professionals must identify impairment in the workplace. At the conclusion of their professional oath, health care professionals agree to abide by the moral concepts within those oaths, including beneficence and nonmaleficence. This means health care professionals agree to do what is best for the patient and to do no harm to patients. It has been well established that impaired health care professionals possess the potential to impact patient safety and patient health. As highlighted by the above example involving the health care professional whose action led to the transmission of hepatitis C to dozens of patients across the country, impaired health care professionals can be a direct threat to patients' well-being. Beneficence dictates that health care professionals must do what is best for the individual patient and

nonmaleficence dictates that health care professionals should avoid bringing harm to patients. Impaired health care professionals can pose a direct risk to patient safety. Therefore, if a health care professional fails to identify impairment in the workplace he or she is not doing what is best for patients nor is the health care professional doing what he or she can to avoid harm being brought to the patient. Thus, health care professionals must identify impairment in the workplace in order to uphold beneficence, nonmaleficence and, ultimately, their professional oaths.

## **Professional Organizations**

To build upon the moral obligations of health care professional oaths, professional organizations such as the American Nurses Association (ANA) and the American Medical Association (AMA) provide codes of medical ethics for health care professionals to follow. The ANA and the AMA have been around for decades and were established to improve health care as well as encourage the moral administration of health care. These organizations provide guidelines to ensure health care is administered safely and effectively. The ANA and the AMA strive for the betterment of health care as well as patient safety. Their practices and recommendations are well respected and are held to the highest standard. Health care professionals are encouraged to not only become familiar with their opinions and policies but to follow them in order to administer safe and effective health care, which provides the second major reason why health care professionals should identify impairment in the workplace. Both the ANA and the AMA encourage health care professionals to identify impairment. For example, AMA opinion 9.031 informs health care professionals that they have an ethical obligation to identify impairment<sup>3</sup>. The recommendations and the opinions of the ANA and AMA should not be taken lightly and should be considered when identifying impairment in the workplace.

## **Regulatory Requirements**

In addition to the aforementioned reasons, health care professionals may have regulatory requirements and therefore a regulatory reason to identify impairment in the workplace. Each state is different, however many states require health care professionals to identify impairment. For example, the state of Florida has a mandatory reporting law, which is included in section 464.018 of Florida's state statutes<sup>4</sup>. The law, which is highlighted in Table 1, essentially indicates that health care professionals must identify impaired health care professionals. The law was

established to not only protect patients but also impaired health care professionals. Often impaired health care professionals want to seek help and/or treatment, however they lack the necessary support and initiative. Identifying impaired health care professionals can be the first step to helping them seek treatment. The state of Florida also has a state law regarding treatment for impaired health care professionals. Section 456.076 of Florida's state statutes<sup>5</sup>, which is highlighted in Table 2, outlines the treatment options for impaired health care professionals. It is highly recommended that health care professionals consult their respective individual state laws to understand what their regulatory responsibilities are when identifying impairment in the workplace.



**Table 1: Florida State Statute Section 464.018 (a - m)<sup>4</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>(1) The following acts constitute grounds for denial of a license or disciplinary action, as specified in s. 456.072(2):

- (a) Procuring, attempting to procure, or renewing a license to practice nursing by bribery, by knowing misrepresentations, or through an error of the department or the board.
- (b) Having a license to practice nursing revoked, suspended, or otherwise acted against, including the denial of licensure, by the licensing authority of another state, territory, or country.
- (c) Being convicted or found guilty of, or entering a plea of nolo contendere to, regardless of adjudication, a crime in any jurisdiction which directly relates to the practice of nursing or to the ability to practice nursing.
- (d) Being found guilty, regardless of adjudication, of any of the following offenses:
  - 1. A forcible felony as defined in chapter 776.
  - 2. A violation of chapter 812, relating to theft, robbery, and related crimes.
  - 3. A violation of chapter 817, relating to fraudulent practices.
  - 4. A violation of chapter 800, relating to lewdness and indecent exposure.
  - 5. A violation of chapter 784, relating to assault, battery, and culpable negligence.
  - 6. A violation of chapter 827, relating to child abuse.
  - 7. A violation of chapter 415, relating to protection from abuse, neglect, and exploitation.
  - 8. A violation of chapter 39, relating to child abuse, abandonment, and neglect.
- (e) Having been found guilty of, regardless of adjudication, or entered a plea of nolo contendere or guilty to, any offense prohibited under s. 435.04 or similar statute of another jurisdiction; or having committed an act which constitutes domestic violence as defined in s. 741.28.
- (f) Making or filing a false report or record, which the licensee knows to be false, intentionally or negligently failing to file a report or record required by state or federal law, willfully impeding or obstructing such filing or inducing another person to do so. Such reports or records shall include only those which are signed in the nurse's capacity as a licensed nurse.
- (g) False, misleading, or deceptive advertising.
- (h) Unprofessional conduct, as defined by board rule.
- (i) Engaging or attempting to engage in the possession, sale, or distribution of controlled substances as set forth in chapter 893, for any other than legitimate purposes authorized by this part

**Table 2: Florida State Statute Section 456.076 (a - m)<sup>5</sup>**

**Impaired practitioner programs.**

(1) As used in this section, the term:

(a) “Consultant” means the individual or entity who operates an approved impaired practitioner program pursuant to a contract with the department and who is retained by the department as provided in subsection (2).

(b) “Evaluator” means a state-licensed or nationally certified individual who has been approved by a consultant or the department, who has completed an evaluator training program established by the consultant, and who is therefore authorized to evaluate practitioners as part of an impaired practitioner program.

(c) “Impaired practitioner” means a practitioner with an impairment.

(d) “Impaired practitioner program” means a program established by the department by contract with one or more consultants to serve impaired and potentially impaired practitioners for the protection of the health, safety, and welfare of the public.

(e) “Impairment” means a potentially impairing health condition that is the result of the misuse or abuse of alcohol, drugs, or both, or a mental or physical condition that could affect a practitioner’s ability to practice with skill and safety.

(f) “Inability to progress” means a determination by a consultant based on a participant’s response to treatment and prognosis that the participant is unable to safely practice despite compliance with treatment requirements and his or her participant contract.

(g) “Material noncompliance” means an act or omission by a participant in violation of his or her participant contract as determined by the department or consultant.

(h) “Participant” means a practitioner who is participating in the impaired practitioner program by having entered into a participant contract. A practitioner ceases to be a participant when the participant contract is successfully completed or is terminated for any reason.

(i) “Participant contract” means a formal written document outlining the requirements established by a consultant for a participant to successfully complete the impaired practitioner program, including the participant’s monitoring plan.

(j) “Practitioner” means a person licensed, registered, certified, or regulated by the department under part III of chapter 401; chapter 457; chapter 458; chapter 459; chapter 460; chapter 461; chapter 462; chapter 463; chapter 464; chapter 465; chapter 466; chapter 467; part I, part II, part III, part V, part X, part XIII, or part XIV of chapter 468; chapter 478; chapter 480; part III or part IV of chapter 483; chapter 484; chapter 486; chapter 490; or

## Section 2: Summary

Health care professionals should follow the 3 Rs when identifying impairment in the workplace, Reason, Recognize, Report. The first of the 3 Rs stands for Reason or more specifically, to understand and recognize the reasons why it is important to identify impairment in the workplace. Some of the primary reasons to identify impairment in the workplace include upholding professional oaths, meeting professional organization's recommendations and regulatory requirements. The primary obligation of health care professionals is to their patients. Therefore, individual health care professionals must take it upon themselves to identify impairment in the workplace in order to protect patient safety.

### Section 2: Key Concepts

- Health care professionals should understand and recognize reasons why it is important to identify impairment in the workplace.
- Some of the primary reasons to identify impairment in the workplace include: upholding professional oaths, meeting professional organization's recommendations and regulatory requirements.

### Section 2: Key Terms

Beneficence - refers to the act of doing what is best for the patient<sup>2</sup>

Nonmaleficence - refers to inflicting no harm to patients; do no harm to patients<sup>2</sup>

### Section 2: Personal Reflection Question

Why is it important for health care professionals to know their state's regulatory requirements regarding identifying impairment in the workplace?

## Section 3: Recognize

The second of the 3 Rs of identifying impairment in the workplace stands for **Recognize**, or more specifically, **Recognizing** impairment. Recognizing impairment can refer to the act of acknowledging the characteristics and/or signs and symptoms of impairment in another individual. It has been established that health care professionals have several reasons to identify impairment in the workplace and it is their duty and responsibility to identify impairment. Therefore, health care professionals must understand how to identify impairment. The best way for health care professionals to identify impairment in the workplace is to know how to recognize the signs and symptoms of impairment. Although recognizing impairment can be a challenge, knowing what to look for can make all the difference.

The reason why recognizing impairment in the workplace can be a challenge is due, in part, to the non-specific signs and symptoms of impairment. Due to the complexity and the nature of impairment, it can manifest itself in a variety of ways and can show up in many different forms. Therefore, impairment in the workplace can be easily misinterpreted. Often the signs and symptoms of impairment are concealed and/or dismissed by those who exhibit them, making it that much harder to discern the signs and symptoms of impairment from those of stress, lack of sleep, disease, illness and/or personal turmoil. However, there is a method health care professionals can use when distinguishing impairment. The method involves a two-part approach or strategy to recognizing impairment in the workplace. The two-part strategy outlines the observation process and clearly identifies what health care professionals should look for when attempting to recognize impairment.

As previously mentioned, the signs and symptoms of impairment can be non-specific and therefore, hard to differentiate. To circumvent the obstacle of the non-specific signs and symptoms of impairment, health care professionals should employ the first part of the two-part strategy to recognizing impairment in the workplace. The first part of the strategy separates the signs and symptoms of impairment into two distinct categories, impaired behavior and physical signs and symptoms of impairment, both of which are highlighted in Table 3. The strategy then encourages health care professionals to view the signs and symptoms of impairment through these two individual lenses when observing fellow health care professionals suspected of impairment. By doing so, health care professionals can narrow down the scope of what they are looking for and focus their attention on specific characteristics of impairment. The first part of the strategy also encourages health care professionals to look for combinations of different individual signs and symptoms of impairment from

each category. As previously highlighted, the signs and symptoms of impairment are often dismissed by those who exhibit them and redirected and/or explained away as signs and symptoms of stress, lack of sleep, disease, illness and/or personal turmoil. By focusing on the characteristics of impairment and by identifying multiple combinations of different signs and symptoms from each category, it becomes harder for those signs and symptoms to be ignored and/or dismissed. One of two individual symptoms can be explained, but multiple combinations of varying signs and symptoms from different categories can be much harder for health care professionals to overlook. Employing the first part of the two-part strategy can assist health care professionals in focusing their observations and differentiating impairment.

**Table 3: Signs and Symptoms of Impairment**

<p>Impaired behavior</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Severe mood swings<sup>6</sup></li> <li>•Personality changes<sup>6</sup></li> <li>•Frequent and/or unexplained tardiness/ work absences<sup>6</sup></li> <li>•Unreliability<sup>6</sup></li> <li>•Decreased job performance<sup>6</sup></li> <li>•Relationship discord<sup>6</sup></li> <li>•Confusion<sup>6</sup></li> <li>•Memory loss<sup>6</sup></li> <li>•Impaired cognition<sup>7</sup></li> <li>•Isolation and/or withdrawal<sup>7</sup></li> <li>•Fearful/anxious<sup>7</sup></li> <li>•Paranoid<sup>7</sup></li> <li>•Makes frequent trips to the bathroom<sup>7</sup></li> <li>•Frequently losses, spills or wastes medications<sup>7</sup></li> <li>•Makes frequent unexplained disappearances from the unit<sup>7</sup></li> <li>•Volunteers to count narcotics<sup>7</sup></li> <li>•Exhibits evidence of tampering with vials or capsules<sup>7</sup></li> <li>•Frequently works overtime, arrives early and stays late<sup>7</sup></li> <li>•Overmedicates patients compared to other nurses<sup>7</sup></li> <li>•Often disregards safety policies and procedure<sup>7</sup></li> <li>•Maintains a disheveled appearances<sup>7</sup></li> </ul>
--------------------------	--

Physical signs and symptoms of impairment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Track marks<sup>6</sup></li> <li>•Bloodshot, red and/or watery eyes<sup>6</sup></li> <li>•Significant weight loss or gain<sup>6</sup></li> <li>•Runny nose<sup>7</sup></li> <li>•Dilated or constricted pupils<sup>7</sup></li> <li>•Walking with an unsteady, stiff and/or listing gait<sup>7</sup></li> <li>•Exhibits tremors restlessness and/or slurred speech<sup>7</sup></li> <li>•Sleeps at work<sup>7</sup></li> </ul>
---	--

The second part of the two-part strategy to recognizing impairment in the workplace addresses the necessary duration of observation. Often when health care professionals observe fellow health care professionals exhibiting impaired behavior and/or physical signs and symptoms of impairment, they are not sure when they should act and typically question how long they should observe the suspected individual. Although each situation is different and may require different durations of observation, employing the second part of the two-part strategy to recognizing impairment in the workplace can be a starting point from which to gauge future action. The second part of the strategy encourages health care professionals to establish a baseline of behavior regarding the suspected health care professional. Each individual is different and therefore may display different personalities and behavior patterns. What may seem odd and different to one person may be common and ordinary to another. Establishing an individual behavior baseline can help health care professionals determine if observed behavior is related to individual personality traits and/or eccentricities or impairment. Establishing an individual behavior baseline can also help health care professionals determine if the observed behavior is escalating or remains consistent. Impaired behavior has a tendency to worsen over time. Establishing an individual behavior baseline can help health care professionals distinguish impairment. Establishing an individual behavior baseline may take weeks or months. Each case possesses the potential to be different and therefore may require varying durations of observation. With that said, patient safety is top priority. If a health care professional poses an immediate risk to patient safety, immediate action may be required. The aforementioned two-part strategy can assist health care professionals to recognize impairment in the workplace. By knowing what to look for and how to look for it, health care professionals can be better equipped to identify impairment and ensure patient safety.

### Section 3: Case Study 1: Recognizing the Signs and Symptoms of Impairment

For the past 5 years, Nurse A and Nurse B have worked together on the same hospital unit. Nurse A and Nurse B have worked closely with each other and have maintained a professional relationship with no reports of misconduct between them. Recently, while working together, Nurse A recognized Nurse B exhibiting erratic and odd behavior. As a result, Nurse A began to observe and document Nurse B's behavior. Over the course of the next few months, Nurse A observed Nurse B's behavioral changes, which ultimately resulted in, what appeared to be, a personality change. During that time, Nurse A observed Nurse B exhibited severe mood swings, anxious behavior and paranoia. Nurse A also observed that Nurse B became progressively unreliable and withdrawn. In addition, Nurse A noted that Nurse B often showed up to work late, disheveled and with bloodshot eyes. Furthermore, Nurse A recognized that Nurse B's weight went through a dramatic change and that Nurse B's gait become increasingly unsteady.

*Which of Nurse A's observations regarding Nurse B may be categorized as impaired behavior?*

Nurse A made several observations regarding Nurse B over the course of a few months. The following observations regarding Nurse B may be categorized as impaired behavior: personality change, severe mood swings, anxious behavior, paranoia, progressive unreliability, withdrawal, tardiness and disheveled appearance.

*Which of Nurse A's observations regarding Nurse B may be categorized as physical signs and symptoms of impairment?*

The following observations made by Nurse A regarding Nurse B may be categorized as physical signs and symptoms of impairment: bloodshot eyes, weight changes and unsteady gait.

*How did the observation strategy utilized by Nurse A help recognize potential impairment in the workplace?*

Nurse A and Nurse B worked together for several years, without incident. Therefore, an individual behavior baseline was firmly established. When Nurse A initially recognized Nurse B exhibiting erratic and odd behavior, Nurse A began to make further observations over the course of a few months, which she compared to the established individual behavior baseline. Nurse A's observations during that time period included characteristics of impaired behavior as well as physical signs and symptoms of impairment. Nurse A was sure to identify multiple combinations of different signs and symptoms from each of the aforementioned categories. Due to the nature of Nurse A's observation as well as the established individual behavior baseline, potential impairment was recognized.

## Reacting to Impairment

It is very important to know how to recognize impairment. However, it has been said that it is also very important to know how to react when recognizing impairment. Recognizing impairment in the workplace can be frightening, startling and uncomfortable, which is why it is essential to obtain an understanding of how to behave and react while recognizing and observing impairment. It cannot be understated when it is emphasized to remain calm while recognizing and observing impairment. Remaining calm while recognizing and observing impairment is paramount for several reasons. The first of which is that health care professionals must be sure of *what* they are observing *while* they are observing it. Remaining calm will provide the state of mind and clarity necessary to notice and recall details of the observation. Often, when individuals become panicked or anxious they miss details and/or misconstrue what they are observing. Remaining calm can assist health care professionals to obtain the details necessary for accurate documentation, making remaining calm vital to the observation process. It is a good idea for health care professionals to document what they observed or recognized. Precise documentation, which should include dates and times, can support evidence linking impairment to specific individuals. Remaining calm can provide health care professionals with the wherewithal to document each event that is observed. Lastly, by maintaining a calm demeanor, health care professionals can remain unseen or unnoticed during the observation process. An exaggerated or exuberant response during the observation process could alert the suspected individual that he or she is being observed and thus thwart further opportunities to collect evidence or information regarding the suspected impairment. In short, remaining calm while recognizing and observing impairment can help health care professionals obtain the information they require to effectively identify impairment and preserve patient safety.

## Section 3: Summary

The second of the 3 Rs of identifying impairment in the workplace stands for **Recognize**, or more specifically, **Recognize** impairment. Health care professionals have a duty and responsibility to identify impairment in the workplace. Therefore, health care professionals must understand how to recognize impairment. Recognizing impairment can be a challenge due to the non-specific nature of the signs and symptoms of impairment. Health care professionals can use a two-part strategy to help them overcome the challenge of recognizing impairment in the workplace. The first part of the strategy encourages health care professionals to identify multiple

combinations of impaired behavior and physical signs and symptoms of impairment, while the second part of the strategy recommends establishing an individual behavior baseline when observing impairment. The aforementioned two-part strategy can help health care professionals focus their attention on the characteristics of impairment in order to improve upon their abilities to differentiate impairment in the workplace. Health care professionals must also have an understanding of how to react when recognizing impairment. Recognizing impairment in the workplace can be frightening, startling and uncomfortable. However, it is best for health care professionals to remain calm when faced with impairment. Maintaining a calm demeanor while recognizing and observing impairment can help health care professionals obtain the information they require to properly identify impairment in the work place. Recognizing impairment in health care settings is essential to upholding patients' safety. Knowing what to look for, how to look for it and how to react can improve upon health care professionals' abilities to identify impairment in the workplace in order to ensure patient safety.

### **Section 3: Key Concepts**

- Recognizing impairment in the workplace can be challenging due to the non-specific signs and symptoms of impairment.
- Health care professionals can employ a two-part strategy of recognizing the characteristics of impairment and establishing an individual behavior baseline to better identify impairment in the workplace.
- Health care professionals should remain calm while recognizing and observing impairment.

### **Section 3: Key Term**

Recognizing impairment - refers to the act of acknowledging the characteristics and/or signs and symptoms of impairment in another individual

### Section 3: Personal Reflection Question

Why is it important for health care professionals to remain calm when recognizing and observing impairment in the workplace?

## Section 4: Report

The third of the 3 Rs of identifying impairment in the workplace stands for Report, or more specifically, Reporting impairment. Reporting impairment may be the most important of the 3 Rs of identifying impairment in the workplace. Provision 3.6 of the ANA's Code of Ethics for Nurses states the following:

*"Nurses must protect the patient, the public, and the profession from potential harm when a colleague's practice appears to be impaired. When another's practice appears to be impaired, the nurse's duty is to take action to protect patients and to ensure that the impaired individual receives assistance."<sup>8</sup>*

In short, it is the duty of all nurses, independent of the health care setting, to report impairment in the workplace. Unfortunately, reporting impairment in the workplace is not always an easy endeavor. As previously highlighted, reporting impairment can be a challenge for health care professionals. Often health care professionals are not sure how to take action once impairment is recognized. Many hope the situation will simply go away or the suspected impaired health care professional will admit he or she is impaired and seek help. The truth is, typically, those things do not occur. Impairment in the workplace does not just disappear and, all too commonly, impaired health care professionals do not freely admit their impairment. As alluded to by the ANA, it is up to the individual health care professional to report impairment in the workplace in order to protect patient safety. With that said, what can nurses and other health care professionals do to make the reporting process easier and more effective? Fortunately, there are several methods to make the reporting process easier and more effective, the first of which is education.

## Education

Education is key to reporting impairment in the workplace. Health care professionals must be educated regarding how to report impairment in their individual health care settings. Each health care setting is different. However, each organization should have its own policies and procedures regarding impairment reporting, especially if it is a Joint Commission accredited facility. The Joint Commission is an independent, non-profit organization, which accredits and certifies health care organizations, facilities and programs across the United States of America<sup>9</sup>. One of the goals of the Joint Commission is to ensure the safe and effective administration of health care. The Joint Commission establishes health care standards and works to verify those standards are being met by health care institutions. If an organization is accredited by the Joint Commission, then it must meet the Joint Commission's recommendations and standards. One of the standards of the Joint Commission is that each accredited facility must have a process in place which protects patients from potentially impaired health care professionals<sup>9</sup>. Therefore, if a health care professional's facility is Joint Commission accredited then it almost certainly has policies and procedures for reporting impairment in the workplace. The policies and procedures for impairment reporting are there to help individual health care professionals understand what he or she should do in the event of impairment. In other words, they are a guide health care professionals can use to ease the reporting process. Understanding, organizational policies and procedures regarding impairment is vital to the reporting process. Without a firm understanding of how to report impairment within a health care organization, health care professionals cannot effectively report impairment or safeguard patients from those health care professionals who may be impaired. Thus, education regarding organizational policies and procedures is essential to the impairment reporting process.

Health care professionals should also become educated on the focus of reporting. As outlined by the Joint Commission, the focus of reporting, in addition to patient safety, is for health care professional rehabilitation rather than discipline. A lack of understanding about the focus of reporting prevents many health care professionals from reporting impairment once it has been recognized. Some health care professionals believe that reporting fellow health care professionals may destroy their career and/or personal life when in practice, it can be quite the opposite. Reporting a health care professional may save his or her career and/or personal life. Many impaired health care professionals may want to get help or receive treatment for their substance abuse - however, they may lack the initiative to do so. Reporting fellow health care professionals suffering from substance abuse may be the very

catalyst they require to get the much needed help they need. It is often difficult for an individual to admit to having a substance abuse problem. Many individuals suffering from substance abuse often abuse drugs and/or alcohol for years before they seek help. It can be even more difficult for health care professionals to admit they may have a substance abuse problem due to the fear of losing their careers. Fortunately, that is not necessarily the case. Often, impaired health care professionals are offered treatment and rehabilitation once they are reported. Many are even invited back into the workplace once their treatment and recovery is complete. By nature, administering health care is caring for people when they are sick or suffering. Fortunately, that sentiment is not lost on those who administer health care. When a potentially impaired health care professional is reported, he or she is offered an opportunity for treatment and rehabilitation.

There are many treatment options available for health care professionals suffering from substance abuse. Some health care professional may chose an inpatient recovery facility or an outpatient program. One of the oldest treatment options, and perhaps the most well known, is Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). AA is an international fellowship of men and women who have had drinking problems<sup>10</sup>. There are no requirements to join AA and everyone is welcome to pursue sobriety through their 12-step program. AA has a long history of success and is always innovating to help those struggling with alcohol.

Another treatment option for health care professionals suffering from substance abuse is Narcotics Anonymous (NA). NA is a global, community-based organization that specializes in drug addiction<sup>11</sup>. Much like AA, NA is open to all and offers treatment through a 12-step program. NA offers a long-term network of support to individuals aspiring to live a drug-free lifestyle<sup>11</sup> and rehabilitate their lives and career. Whatever treatment option a health care professional chooses, the point remains the same: once a potentially impaired health care professional is reported, he or she may be given an opportunity to seek treatment and reenter the workplace free from the perils of impairment. Reporting impairment in the workplace is a means to protect patient safety, and it can also be a means to help fellow health care professionals in need.

## **Document Impairment**

Another way health care professionals can make the reporting process easier and more effective is to document impairment in the workplace once it has been

recognized or observed. In health care settings, documentation can refer to the process of creating a digital or analog record of pertinent information regarding health care. Documentation can be used as a means to record health care related incidents in order to create a detailed account of what occurred. Documentation can be used for recording medication errors, adverse events and health care interventions. Documentation can provide a concise explanation of health care events to effectively communicate vital information. It can also be a way for one health care professional to correspond with another health care professional regarding patient status. In short, detailed documentation can be a means for health care professionals to record and transmit information in order to increase the overall effectiveness of health care administration. Documentation keeps the vital communication channels between health care professionals open and allows for a free flow of relevant information among health care professionals across multiple disciplines. The information recorded in health care documentation can be used to adjust medication doses, schedule medications and allow for consultations. The information recorded in health care documentation can also be used to report impairment.

When a health care professional recognizes and observes impairment in the workplace, he or she should document what is observed. Important details such as, times, dates, names and a description of what transpired, should be included in the documentation. In essence, a health care professional should use documentation to create a record of what he or she observed in order to preserve the observations for reporting purposes. When health care professionals document impairment, they are essentially creating a means to communicate the details of what they observed in order to clearly report what was recognized and observed. Without a record of what was observed, details could be lost and the health care professional's ability to effectively identify impairment could become compromised. The following example will highlight that concept.

Nurse 1 and Nurse 2 have worked together on the same hospital unit for the past 2 years. Over the course of about 8 months, Nurse 1 observed Nurse 2's behavior changing. During that time, Nurse 1 observed Nurse 2 exhibiting bouts of anxiety, irritability and paranoia. Nurse 1 also observed Nurse 2 frequently using the bathroom and leaving the unit for no apparent reason. In addition, Nurse 1 observed that Nurse 2 often had red, watery eyes and a runny nose. Based on the observations, Nurse 1 began to suspect that Nurse 2 may be impaired. All of the observations point to impairment, therefore Nurse 1 was confident about the conclusion of possible impairment. However, Nurse 1 did not document any of the previous observations over the course of the 8 months. Nurse 1 attempts to report Nurse 2, although there is no

documentation to support the claims. When asked to provide specific details including dates, times and descriptions of observed impaired behavior, Nurse 1 is unable to do so. Essentially, Nurse 1 cannot provide an accurate or detailed account of Nurse 2's behavior during the previous 8 months. As a result, the impairment investigation stalls.

A few weeks later Nurse 1 observes Nurse 2 exhibiting slurred speech while appearing extremely disheveled. Two weeks later, Nurse 1 observes Nurse 2 tampering with capsules. This time Nurse 1 documents the events with great detail and is sure to include times, dates, names and descriptions of the observed behavior. Nurse 1 then makes another attempt to report Nurse 2. Due to the provided documentation, swift action is taken and Nurse 2 is effectively identified for potential impairment. Fortunately, in the previous example, Nurse 1 was able to make adjustments, document potential impairment and eventually use the documentation to effectively identify impairment in the workplace. With that said, initially, Nurse 1 did not document any of the observations made, regarding Nurse 2, over the 8 month time period prior to the first report attempt. As a result, Nurse 1 was unable to provide an accurate description of what occurred with Nurse 2 during the 8 months in question. Nurse 1 was unable to communicate what was observed or the signs and symptoms of impairment that were recognized. Due to the lack of a detailed account of Nurse 2's behavior, the initial impairment investigation was stalled and impairment was not effectively identified. However, Nurse 1 learned from the first report attempt and from that point on, documented potential impairment. Nurse 1's documentation was used to communicate the details of the observations in order to provide an accurate and reliable account of what occurred. In essence, Nurse 1 created a record of Nurse 2's behavior which was used to effectively investigate and identify impairment in the workplace. The previous example had a positive conclusion. Nurse 1 was able to learn from the previous mistakes and get a second chance at reporting impairment. However, not all cases end like the previous example. Often health care professionals are not allotted multiple attempts to effectively report and identify impairment, which is why it is critical for health care professionals to get it right the first time. Documenting observed events with accurate times, dates, names and descriptions can help health care professionals in their attempts to report impairment. The act of documenting an event creates a record and a means to communicate the details of what was observed. When a health care professional reports potential impairment in the workplace, he or she can then refer to the documentation to provide the necessary information to identify impairment in the workplace. In short, documentation can ease the reporting process and aid all those attempting to effectively identify impairment in the workplace.

## Inform a Manager or Senior Colleague

One of the most important things a health care professional should do when reporting impairment is to inform his or her manager or senior colleague. Once health care professionals recognize, observe and document impairment, their next step should be to contact their manager regarding the suspected impairment. There are three main reasons why a manager should be informed about suspected impairment. The first reason is due to health care managers' responsibilities to their staff. One of the roles of health care managers is to serve their staff and make sure they have what they need to effectively administer health care to patients. Understanding each employee's strengths and weaknesses is essential to the manager's responsibilities. Health care managers cannot serve their employees and, ultimately, patients if they do not have information about their staff. Knowing when staff members are excelling in their roles or having problems can provide managers with valuable insight, which they can then use to make adjustments in order to improve staff efficiencies and the overall effectiveness of health care administration. Providing managers with information can not only make a health care professional's job easier, but also improve upon patient care.

The second major reason health care managers should be informed about suspected impairment in the workplace is due to their expertise and available knowledge. Health care managers should be well versed and trained on how to handle suspected impairment in the workplace. They should be aware of their facility's policies and procedures regarding impairment and should know what steps must be taken to properly identify impairment. Informing a health care manager about suspected impairment can ease the reporting process for health care professionals. By contacting a health care manager, health care professionals can gain the knowledge, guidance and leadership required to effectively identify impairment in the workplace.

Lastly, health care managers should be informed about suspected impairment so they can assist health care professionals in observing the potentially impaired individuals. There is only so much one person can do when it comes to observing a potentially impaired individual. Due to scheduling and the nature of administering health care, one person can only observe so much. By informing a health care manager about suspected impairment, a health care professional can gain assistance in the observation process. When managers are notified about potential impairment they typically take it upon themselves to observe the suspected individual in order to gain insight into the situation. A manager's insight can be invaluable in determining suspected impairment. The manager's insight can provide clarity about the situation

and help health care professionals understand if what they are observing are indeed the signs and symptoms of impairment. Furthermore, a health care manager's documented observations regarding impairment can provide additional evidence of suspected impairment, which can strengthen and support the reporting process. In short, one of the roles of health care managers is to provide leadership for their staff. They are there to help and assist their employees in their professional duties which extend to identifying impairment in the workplace. Managers can provide knowledge and guidance to health care professionals, which can make the reporting process easier and more effective.

### **Follow up With Management**

After a health care professional reports suspected impairment to senior management, that does not necessarily mean the reporting process has come to an end. Health care professionals should always follow up on their reports. Health care professionals should continue to observe the individual suspected of impairment as well as document their observations. Sometimes action is not immediately taken by management when a health care professional is suspected of impairment. Unless the actions of a potentially impaired individual are gratuitous and/or pose immediate harm to patient safety, a investigation by senior management typically takes place. During the time the suspected individual is under observation by management, health care professionals should also continue to observe the potentially impaired individual. Further documentation outlining additional examples of potential impaired behavior can be used as supporting evidence once action is taken by management. In addition, the health care professional who made the report may be called upon by senior management to answer questions regarding the suspected individual. Additional evidence and documentation may be presented to senior management to support the original observations. Additionally, continued observations and documentation can help establish a timeline of impaired behavior which can be used by senior management to determine their strategy for action. Continuing to observe potentially impaired individuals can only help health care professionals and make the overall reporting process more effective. By continuing to observe impairment in the workplace, health care professionals can be ready to provide any additional information and documentation to senior management, which can be used to further support the investigation process and/or future action plans.

Health care professionals should also directly follow up with their manager to assure action has been taken. As previously highlighted, impaired health care professionals

pose a risk to patient safety. If a health care professional's continued observations reveal an escalation in impaired behavior, then those observations should be documented and immediately brought to the attention of a health care manager. If the health care professional believes his or her manager is not taking the appropriate action, the health care professional may have to follow up with senior management. Furthermore, if a health care professional shows up to work and appears to be under the influence of a substance such as drugs or alcohol then immediate, follow up action is warranted. The suspected health care professional may have to be immediately removed from the unit, undergo a drug screen and receive medical attention. For the safety of the health care professional and for the safety of their patients, emergency action and following up on the reporting process may be required. The bottom line is simple regarding reporting: every situation is different and therefore requires a different course of action. By following up with a health care manager, a health care professional can make sure he or she is doing all that is necessary to ensure the safety of the potentially impaired health care professional and the patients they serve.

## Section 4: Summary

The third, and perhaps the most important, of the 3 Rs of identifying impairment in the workplace stands for Report, or more specifically, Reporting impairment. Nurses and other health care professionals have a duty and responsibility to report impairment in the workplace. However, reporting impairment in the workplace can be a challenge for some health care professionals. Fortunately, there are several methods health care professionals can use to make the reporting process easier and more effective. Through education, documentation, communication with a health care manager and by following up on the reporting process, health care professionals can overcome most obstacles in their way and assure impairment is properly identified. After all, the focus of reporting, in addition to patient safety, is for health care professional rehabilitation. Reporting impairment could potentially help fellow health care professionals suffering from substance abuse as well as improve patient safety. Therefore, health care professionals should take the necessary steps to assure impairment is effectively reported and identified. Reporting impairment in the workplace is a duty; however, it is also a means for health care professionals to improve the workplace and the overall administration of health care to patients.

#### **Section 4: Key Concepts**

- The focus for reporting impairment in the workplace is to ensure patient safety and offer rehabilitation opportunities to impaired health care professionals.
- Health care professionals can make the reporting process easier and more effective through education, documentation, communication with a health care manager and by following up on the reporting process.

#### **Section 4: Key Terms**

The Joint Commission - refers to the independent, non-profit organization, which accredits and certifies health care organizations, facilities and programs across the United States of America<sup>9</sup>

Documentation - refers to the process of creating a digital or analog record of pertinent information regarding health care

#### **Section 4: Personal Reflection Question**

How can effective communication improve the process of reporting impairment in the workplace?

## **Conclusion**

Health care professionals are not immune to substance abuse and/or impairment. It has been estimated that 10% - 15% of all health care professionals will suffer from substance abuse<sup>1</sup> at some point in their careers. Therefore, health care professionals often find themselves in situations where they can observe impairment in the workplace. Impaired health care professionals can dramatically impact patients' safety, health, quality of life and overall well-being. In short, impaired health care professionals pose a significant risk to patient safety. Consequently, it is vital for health care professionals to identify impairment in the workplace. To effectively

identify impairment health care professionals should follow the 3 Rs of identifying impairment in the workplace: **Reason, Recognize, Report.**

First, health care professionals should **Reason** or, more specifically, understand the reasons *why* it is important to identify impairment in the workplace. Some of the primary reasons to identify impairment in the workplace include upholding professional oaths, meeting professional organization's recommendations and regulatory requirements. The primary obligation of health care professionals is to their patients. Therefore, individual health care professionals must take it upon themselves to identify impairment in the workplace in order to protect patient safety.

Secondly, health care professionals must understand how to **Recognize** impairment. Impairment can be recognized by observing health care professionals and knowing what to look for. Health care professionals should look for both characteristics of impaired behavior and physical signs and symptoms of impairment. Health care professionals should also establish individual behavior baselines and react to impairment in a professional manner.

Finally, health care professionals must **Report** impairment in the workplace once it is properly recognized. To effectively report impairment, health care professionals should educate themselves on their facility's policies and procedures, document their observations, communicate with health care managers and follow up with their health care managers to ensure action is being taken.

Regardless of the health care setting, health care professionals will, most likely, encounter impairment in the workplace at some point in their careers. The process of identifying impairment may seem like a challenge - however, it must be done. Health care professionals have a moral obligation to their patients. It is their duty and responsibility to ensure patient safety, which means they must identify impairment in the workplace. Identifying impairment in the workplace goes a long way to protect patient safety - however, it also provides a means to improve the workplace and offer treatment and rehabilitation to impaired health care professionals. The overall sentiment and goal of health care is to care for those individuals who are sick or suffering, while providing them with a safe environment to improve upon their health and overall well-being. By identifying impairment in the workplace, health care professionals can ensure that sentiment and goal is not lost among fellow health care professionals and health care is effectively administered to those in need.

## References

1. Baldisseri et al. *Impaired healthcare professional*. Crit Care Med 2007 Vol. 35, No.2.
2. Bhanji SM. *Health Care Ethics*. J Clin Res Bioeth 4:142. (2013). doi: 10.4172/2155-9627.1000142.
3. "American Medical Association Code of Medical Ethics' Opinions on Physicians' Health and Conduct," <http://journalofethics.ama-assn.org>
4. "The 2017 Florida Statutes, Chapter 464," <http://www.leg.state.fl.us>
5. "The 2017 Florida Statutes, Chapter 456," <http://www.leg.state.fl.us>
6. "Signs and Behaviors of Impaired Colleagues," <http://www.aana.com>
7. "A Guide for Assisting Colleagues Who Demonstrate Impairment in the Workplace," <http://www.doh.wa.gov>
8. "Code of Ethics for Nurses," <http://nursingworld.org>
9. "The Joint Commission," [www.jointcommission.org](http://www.jointcommission.org)
10. "What is AA," [www.aa.org](http://www.aa.org)
11. "What is narcotics anonymous," [www.na.org](http://www.na.org)





“The material contained herein was created by EdCompass, LLC (“EdCompass”) for the purpose of preparing users for course examinations on websites owned by EdCompass, and is intended for use only by users for those exams. The material is owned or licensed by EdCompass and is protected under the copyright laws of the United States and under applicable international treaties and conventions. Copyright 2017 EdCompass. All rights reserved. Any reproduction, retransmission, or republication of all or part of this material is expressly prohibited, unless specifically authorized by EdCompass in writing.”