

AMERICAN NURSES' ASSOCIATION

THE AMERICAN NURSES' ASSOCIATION VIEWS THE EMERGING PHYSICIAN'S ASSISTANT

Demands for health care services are rising sharply. At the same time, manpower needs in industry and agriculture are decreasing, so that employment must be found for more people in the service fields. The search for means to meet the health care demands and the need for new areas of employment are creating pressures for new careers in the health field.

One of the most significant among the emerging occupations is the "physician's assistant." A variety of training programs are being developed to prepare individuals to assist the physician. The term "physician's assistant" should not be applied to any of the nurse practitioners being prepared to function in an extension of the nursing role. However, the term appropriately can be applied in the training and utilization of persons who under medical direction assist physicians by performing specific delegated medical activities. Some of these individuals are now organizing and seeking recognition as a distinct group of practitioners in health care.

The American Nurses' Association views all nurse practitioners as members of the nursing profession. ANA assumes responsibility for defining the scope of their practice, for determining standards and educational requirements, and for interpreting their ethical and legal relationships with physicians.

The practice of nursing is authorized by the nursing practice acts of the states. A Joint Practice Commission composed of representatives of ANA and the American Medical Association has been established to consider the congruent roles of nurses and physicians. This development holds promise for more effective and efficient utilization of the two major health professions in future health care services.

Several types of assistants are being prepared and utilized to function under the medical direction to extend physician's services. None of these assistants are prepared to be substitutes for nurses, since nursing practice is more than performance of delegated medical nursing activities. Neither are these assistants acceptable substitutes for physicians. This development is of concern to the nursing profession. Physician's assistants working in a setting where nursing practice is an essential element of health care present problems that flow from the legal and ethical relationships between physicians and nurses. Therefore, nurses and physicians together must clarify the situation.

As yet there are no generally accepted guidelines for the preparation of all of these assistants. Further, there are as yet no universally accepted guidelines for the utilization of physician's assistants within the delivery system. Because of the vast differences in current programs, it is essential that efforts be made to bring about some uniformity of educational requirements.

As other groups have done in the past, physician's assistants are becoming organized in an effort to secure licensure, certification and other forms of recognition as a distinct health occupation. Until the functions of the physician's assistant are more clearly identified, and generally acceptable standards for training and practice are evident, licensure for their practice by the states should not be attempted.

The American Nurses' Association supports the call for a moratorium on the licensure of new categories of health workers until studies have been conducted to determine the need for licensure reform. Prior to such reform, it is imperative that the medical profession retain responsibility for delegation of medical acts to physician's assistants.

In licensing law, it first should be possible to define an independent area of practice which must be regulated in the interest of public health and safety. The definition of any health profession's practice should be stated in terms that are broad enough to permit flexibility in the utilization of assisting personnel within the bounds of safety for the client. The definition should also permit changes in practice consistent with desirable trends in health care practices.

Because the economic status of each group involved in health care is part of the economic environment of every other group, the American Nurses' Association has a stake in the economic status of the emerging physician's assistant. The ANA re-emphasizes that in establishing salary systems, recognition must be given to the character of responsibilities carried, and to requirements for education, experience and clinical expertise. In establishing the relationships between salaries of nurses and those of physician's assistants the differences in their responsibilities, preparation and experience should be taken into account.

The development of new health workers has provided impetus for long overdue examination of the health care system including the responsibility of each health worker for providing service to the patient. The focus must become people, their health needs, and meeting these needs through high quality care and in the most efficient and economic manner feasible.

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