Vermont State Board of Nursing  
Position Statement  
Substance Use Disorder in Nursing  

**Question:** What is the role of the nurse and nursing assistant regarding a possible substance use disorder of self or a colleague?  

**Definition:**  
**Substance Use Disorder:** Substance use disorder encompasses a pattern of behaviors that range from misuse to dependency or addiction, involving alcohol, legal drugs or illegal drugs. Addiction is a complex disease with serious physical, emotional, financial and legal consequences (National Council of State Boards of Nursing, 2014).  

**Background:**  
The Vermont Board of Nursing recognizes that substance use disorder may develop into a chronic, relapsing disease that can result in long-lasting changes in the brain. Nurses or nursing assistants with substance use disorder may be unable to practice safely and may not recognize the extent of their impairment. However, treatment and monitoring can be highly effective.  

Many nurses and nursing assistants with substance use disorder are unidentified, unreported, and untreated. Some of these nurses and nursing assistants are high performers who do not fit a stereotype of “impaired.” Signs of substance use disorder include:  

**Behavioral changes:**  
- Changes in job performance  
- Absences from the unit for extended time  
- Frequent use of bathroom  
- Arriving late or leaving early  
- Excessive mistakes or medication errors  

**Physical signs:**  
- Change in appearance  
- Odor of alcohol  
- Increasing isolation from colleagues  
- Inappropriate verbal or emotional responses  
- Confusion, memory lapses, or decreased alertness  

**Indicators of drug diversion:**  
- Discrepancies in narcotic counts  
- Large amounts of narcotic waste  
- Numerous inaccuracies or corrections of documentation  
- Frequent reports of inadequate pain relief from patients  
- Offers to medicate co-workers’ patients for pain  
- Variations in controlled substance discrepancies among shifts or days of the week.  

The Vermont Board of Nursing provides formal discipline and also a non-public, voluntary Alternative Program for qualified licensees who self-report and seek assistance with their substance use disorder. Both formal discipline and the Alternative Program assure that the nurse or nursing assistant receives treatment and does not practice until safe to do so. After returning to work, the participant is closely monitored for an extended time. The aim of the Board of Nursing is to protect the public and safely preserve the career of the participating nurse or nursing assistant.  

**Position Statement which Reflects Nurse’s Roles and Responsibilities:**  

**Role of the nurse or nursing assistant:**
A licensee who may have a substance use disorder is obligated to seek professional assessment and treatment. The licensee may place a confidential call to the Vermont Board of Nursing for information about the Alternative Program. Participation in the Alternative Program is not a right of a licensee or applicant. The Board, in its sole discretion, determines whether an individual is an acceptable candidate. The licensee whose practice may be impaired should return to work only after a qualified professional has determined that practicing the profession will not endanger the health and safety of the nurse/nursing assistant’s patients and a relapse prevention and monitoring plan, if indicated, is in place.

Licensees should be alert for signs of a substance use disorder in co-workers. If the nurse/nursing assistant suspects that a colleague may have worked while impaired, the nurse/nursing assistant has a professional and ethical responsibility to report the suspicion to a manager or supervisor, a human resources professional, and/or the Vermont Board of Nursing. Such a report may lead to earlier diagnosis and treatment and consequent protection of patients as well as the health and career of the affected nurse.

Role of the nurse manager and facility:

Nurse managers and employers of nurses are responsible for the safety and quality of patient care. They should promote safe practice and identification and treatment of substance use disorder by:

- Educating self and staff and providing information about substance use disorder and how to recognize it in a colleague
- Maintaining a confidential, open door policy for reporting
- Providing and encouraging support and understanding for the affected employee
- Establishing a process for investigation and reporting of suspected substance use disorder or relapse
- Removing a nurse/nursing assistant from practice when necessary to protect patients
- Providing support and monitoring of the affected nurse/nursing assistant who returns to practice.

Resources for Substance Use Disorder in Nursing:

Vermont Board of Nursing: call 802-828-1635 or go to https://www.sec.state.vt.us/professional-regulation/professions/nursing/alternative-program-resources.aspx. The Board office can provide brochures for nurses and managers, education, and confidential consultation.

National Council of State Boards of Nursing: brochures, a video, courses, articles, and a manual are available at https://www.ncsbn.org/111.htm

Related Position Statement:

Fitness for Work: https://www.sec.state.vt.us/media/369523/PS-Fitness-for-Work.pdf

References/Citations:

National Council of State Boards of Nursing (2014). What You Need to Know About Substance Use Disorder in Nursing.


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This opinion is subject to change as changes in nursing practice occur.