



The Role of the Registered Nurse in Ambulatory Care Position Statement

Background

Ambulatory care nursing is a unique realm of specialized nursing practice. Ambulatory nurses are leaders in their practice settings and across the continuum of care. They are uniquely qualified to influence organizational standards related to patient safety and care delivery in the outpatient setting. Ambulatory care nurses are knowledge workers who function in a multidisciplinary, collaborative practice environment, where they utilize critical thinking skills to interpret complex information and guide patients and families to health and well being (Swan, Conway-Phillips, & Griffin, 2006).

“Historically, the outpatient setting was the ‘professional home’ of physicians. They saw the majority of their patients in their offices and referred them for other services or levels of care, as needed. Registered nurses were few, as the system was physician driven. However, fiscal caps for hospital care and technological advances moved patients from inpatient venues into the ambulatory care setting. Patients required higher levels of care than in the traditional outpatient settings, and the ambulatory venue saw a growth in the number of professional nurses” (Mastal, 2010, p. 267).

The transition of health care from the inpatient to the outpatient setting has led to challenges with access to care and coordination of services, and has increased the complexity of care delivered outside the hospital walls. This shift has dramatically increased the need for professional nursing services, as patients and their families require increased depth and breadth of care. Ambulatory RNs facilitate patient care services by managing and individualizing care for patients and their families, who increasingly require assistance navigating the complex health care system. In addition to the provision of complex procedural care, professional nursing services provide support with decision-making, patient education and coordination of services.

“Many characteristics differentiate ambulatory care nursing from other specialty practices, including the settings, the characteristics of the patient encounters and focus on groups, communities and populations, as well as individual patients and their families” (Mastal, 2010, p. 267). The current ambulatory care setting is diverse and multifaceted, requiring nurses highly skilled in patient assessment and with the ability to implement a broad range of nursing interventions in a variety of settings. RNs in ambulatory care must possess strong clinical, education and advocacy skills and demonstrate the ability to manage care in complex organizational systems. Registered nurses are uniquely qualified, autonomous providers of patient/family-centered care that is ethical, evidence-based, safe, expert, innovative, healing, compassionate and universally accessible.

Efforts to conserve financial and nursing resources, along with a lack of understanding of differing roles, has led many organizations to under-utilize RNs in ambulatory settings. The economic benefit of care delivered by RNs has been demonstrated by their impact on patient satisfaction, quality patient outcomes, patient safety, reduced adverse events, and reductions in hospital/emergency department admissions (Haas, 2008; Institute of Medicine, 2011; O'Connell, Johnson, Stallmeyer, & Cokingtin, 2001). The future of the American health care system depends upon our ability to utilize registered nurses to the maximum of their expertise, licensure and certification.

Position Statement

It is the position of the American Academy of Ambulatory Care Nursing that:

- RNs enhance patient safety and the quality and effectiveness of care delivery and are thus essential and irreplaceable in the provision of patient care services in the ambulatory setting.
- RNs are responsible for the design, administration and evaluation of professional nursing services within the organization in accordance with the framework established by state nurse practice acts, nursing scope of practice and organizational standards of care.
- RNs provide the leadership necessary for collaboration and coordination of services, which includes defining the appropriate skill mix and delegation of tasks among licensed and unlicensed health care workers.
- RNs are fully accountable in all ambulatory care settings for all nursing services and associated patient outcomes provided under their direction.

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Suggested Readings

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Endorsements

Academy of Medical Surgical Nurses
American Association of Neuroscience Nurses
American Association of Nurse Anesthtists
American Nurses Association
American Society of PeriAnesthesia Nurses
Association for Radiologic & Imaging Nursing
Association of periOperative Registered Nurses
Association of Rehabilitation Nurses
Association of Womens Health, Obstetric and Neonatal Nurses
Emergency Nurses Association
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