

AORN Guidance Statement: Safe On-Call Practices in Perioperative Practice Settings

Introduction

The purpose of this guidance statement is to assist managers and clinicians in developing policies and procedures related to safe call practices for perioperative personnel. Providing care for patients requiring urgent or emergent surgery after regular hours of operation is a reality for perioperative nurses. Perioperative personnel are assigned designated times to be available for unplanned, urgent, or emergent procedures or to provide care for patients whose procedures run over the scheduled time. These assignments are referred to as "call."

Many perioperative nurses take call after scheduled hours, on weekends, and on holidays in addition to their daily shift assignments. Call hours vary, but generally are eight to 16 hours on weekdays, 48 to 64 hours on weekends, and 72 hours or more for extended holiday weekends. Actual hours worked during the call period are unpredictable and can range from 30 minutes to the entire length of the call period. Covering call may strain existing resources, create stress for perioperative staff members, affect safe patient care, and increase the potential for occupational injury due to prolonged work hours.

Background

Traditionally, perioperative nurses have worked eight-hour shifts; however, several new trends in perioperative staffing patterns include fewer, but longer, work days in addition to a call schedule. The expansion of work hour flexibility enhances individual nurse satisfaction and accommodates the organization's objectives.¹ Although the call schedule may be assigned on a rotating basis according to patient population, organizational needs, and demographic challenges, perioperative nurses may take extra call to increase compensation (eg, elective overtime). Perioperative nurses also may be mandated to work beyond their scheduled work/call shift to augment staffing requirements, meet unexpected patient needs, or satisfy organizational expectations (eg, mandatory overtime). These new trends in staffing and call hours have converged to create potentially hazardous conditions for patient and employee safety. There is a lack of current research in trending the number of hours worked per day by nurses. Anecdotal reports suggest that perioperative staff nurses are working longer hours with fewer breaks

and often have inadequate time for rest between shifts.² Twenty-four hour call shifts are becoming more common.³

Long hours and prolonged periods of wakefulness are among working conditions that may have a negative effect on human performance.⁴⁻⁶ It has been reported that 17 hours without sleep can have an adverse affect on performance equivalent to a blood alcohol concentration of 0.05%.¹ At 24 hours without sleep, performance degradation is equivalent to a blood alcohol concentration of 0.10.⁷

Fatigue resulting from working long hours can have a detrimental effect on patient care. Work by Rogers et al demonstrates a link between working long hours and medical errors; the possibility of an error triples after 12.5 hours of work.^{3,5} Moreover, this research identified that medication errors, procedural errors, documentation, and transcription errors occur more frequently as work hours increase.^{7,8} Studies suggest a correlation between sleep deprivation and negative effects on memory, language/numeric skills, visual attention and concentration.⁹⁻¹¹ In addition to creating a risk to patient safety, research indicates that sleep-deprived and fatigued nurses are at increased risk for personal injury on duty and when driving home after an extended work day.^{5,12,13}

The existing nursing shortage is contributing to extended work hours and call shifts for perioperative nurses. It is predicted the number of RNs will fall to 20% below the demand by 2010.² More than 126,000 nursing positions currently are estimated to be unfilled.¹ This increases the burden of perioperative nurse fatigue with longer working hours and extended call requirements.

Guidance Statement

Recognizing that long work hours are a growing concern among nursing organizations, regulatory agencies, patient safety organizations, and perioperative nurses, this document offers a framework from which managers and clinicians can develop and implement methodologies to safely establish a call schedule. The call staffing plan retains the perioperative RN as circulator and is consistent with established AORN recommendations for nurse:patient ratios. The call staffing plan should minimize long work hours and allow for adequate recuperation between shifts. This guidance statement may be adapted to any setting in which call schedules are required.