

Mandatory Continuing Education for Professional Nurse License Renewal

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Continuing education as defined by the American Nurses Association (2005) consists of a “planned, organized learning experience designed to augment the knowledge, skills and attitudes of registered nurses for the enhancement of nursing practice, education, administration and research, thus improving health care to the public.” This important definition outlines not only the goals for continuing education; it also includes the desired results. Continuing education is a way for the nurse to grow within his or her chosen profession. But why should it be mandatory? Research findings show a positive impact on nurse performance, and nurses feel that attendance at continuing education programs does improve personal performance, especially in states where mandatory continuing education exists

(http://www.njsna.org/position_statements/mandatoryceforlicensernewal.html pg1). States which have implemented mandatory continuing education report that nurses have responded favorably and note an increase in the quality and quantity of professional nursing educational programs being offered (<http://web36.epnet.com> p. 2).

A study by nurse researchers in the early 90s has looked at a variety of issues surrounding the controversy about mandatory continuing education for license renewal of the registered professional nurse. These researchers have studied the link between attendance at continuing education programs and improved patient outcomes (Kellerman-Langan, Huntel, Nottingham, 1992). They also examined the methods used to measure outcomes, supervisor support for implementation of practices learned, and nurses’ perceptions of the value of mandatory continuing education (Peden, Rose, Smith, 1992). Researchers also studied the demographics such as educational preparation level, area of specialization, mandatory state vs. non-mandatory state, institutional and personal

attitude towards change (Waddell, 1991). Nursing research supports a link between continuing education and improved patient outcomes.

There have also been studies on voluntary attendance for continuing nursing education programs. These findings note nurses with higher educational preparation, as well as those with the greatest number of working hours, attend more continuing education programs (<http://web36.epnet.com> p. 3). Additional research studies show that mandatory continuing education courses provide an opportunity for the individual to get away from the regular work routine and be exposed to new ideas (American Nurses Association, 2005). This, they say, is another way to help prevent burnout and to allow networking with other nursing professionals. Overall, proponents of mandatory education feel that continuing education is an essential part of the professional role of nursing.

If nurses remain current with advanced technologies, treatment modalities, medications, and procedures, they can provide a higher quality of care. Just as the NCLEX-RN is a test that is required to be taken to prove that entry-level nurses are capable of providing competent care from the basic knowledge they received in nursing school, mandatory continuing education for professional nurse license renewal is evidence that the professional nurse is maintaining and updating this body of knowledge in order to continue to provide competent care.

Moreover, technology is ever changing and medical advances are regularly noted within the health care field. The nurse's knowledge of this new technology is vital in the care they provide for the patient in a variety of clinical settings. Continuing education for health care professionals was instituted with the idea that medical knowledge changes so rapidly that it is necessary to protect the public by requiring practitioners to show proof that they are keeping up, in some way, with these cutting-edge technologies and skills. "Competence is the quality or ability to perform necessary tasks" (Swansburg & Swansburg, 1995).

Knowledge and techniques related to the health field are rapidly expanding according to Carl Lindsay, James Morrison, and E. James Kelley. With such an expansion in the body of health care knowledge, it is necessary that health professionals, especially doctors, dentists, and nurses, continuously update their knowledge and skills. In fact, their patients' lives and well-being often depend on these professionals keeping up to date on the latest health advances. One way this can be done is through continuing education, also known as adult education, in which adults pursue education beyond formal schooling.

Health care professionals need to continue their education in order to be competent practitioners. Many health care professionals would not voluntarily attend continuing education programs; regulations are necessary in order to insure that health care professionals update their skills (Franklin Pierce Law Center, 2005). Writers such as Rockhill and Day are opposed to mandating continuing education on the grounds that it limits freedom. However, society has on occasion limited individual freedom when it became necessary for the public good. Restricting the speed at which one can drive a car and restricting the use of drugs are examples of these limitations. Certainly, protecting the public from unknowledgeable doctors and nurses is necessary for the public good.

Potter and Perry noted, “Competent levels of nursing care are described by the Standards of Clinical Practice. Within these standards are the responsibilities for diversity of care”— safety, education, health promotion, treatment, self-care and planning for the continuity of care (ANA 1998) (Potter & Perry, 2001, pp. 384-385).

Nursing has characteristics that must be met in order to be deemed a profession. Abraham Flexner, in 1915, addressed the issue of what defined a profession. Included in his description were these main ideas:

- ❖ Professional activity is based in intellectual action, along with personal responsibility
- ❖ The practice of a profession is based in knowledge, not routine activities
- ❖ A profession is motivated by altruism, with members working in some sense for the good of society (Zerwekh, 2003, pp. 52-53). As a professional, the nurse has a responsibility to gain knowledge to effect the society’s greater good, with motivation coming from altruism.

From the Code of Ethics for Nursing we see that the professional nurse is responsible for:

- ❖ Participating in the advancement of the profession through contributions to practice, education, administration, and knowledge development
- ❖ Preserving integrity and safety, to maintain competence, and to continue personal and professional growth
- ❖ The profession of nursing, as represented by associations and its members, is responsible for articulating nursing values, for maintaining the integrity of the profession and its practice, and for shaping social policy (Zerwekh, 2003, p. 57).

When an RN takes his or her oath, he or she takes on all the responsibilities that this entails, including abiding by the code of ethics. In doing so, nurses will not be intimidated by new equipment, technology, or advances in the way they perform their duties.

As a class we recommend the following actions for the New York State Board of Nursing as well as the National Council for State Boards of Nursing to consider: 1) continuing education for relicensure of RNs be mandatory, 2) all continuing education classes be fully funded and offered with flexible class hours, 3) and most importantly, it be enforced that continuing education classes be relevant to nurses’ current area of practice.

We believe Gathers (1998) summarizes this issue best: “Neither voluntary nor mandatory continuing education are panaceas for instant upgrading of professional services. They are the beginning of the solution. Continuing education, then, is an essential part of the professional role of nursing.

It is an effective tool to maintain currency. It is a multifaceted approach that must be viewed as a whole. Mandatory continuing education is better than nothing” (p. 124).

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