AWHONN Position Statement

Rights and Responsibilities of Nurses Related to Reproductive Health Care

Position

The Association of Women’s Health, Obstetric and Neonatal Nurses (AWHONN) asserts that nurses have the professional responsibility to provide nonjudgmental nursing care to all patients, either directly or through appropriate and timely referrals. However, AWHONN recognizes that some nurses may have religious or moral objections to participating in certain reproductive health care services, research, or associated activities. Therefore, AWHONN supports the protections afforded under federal law for a nurse who refuses to assist in performing any health care procedure to which the nurse has a moral or religious objection so long as the nurse has given appropriate notice to his or her employer.

The Responsibility of the Nurse to Protect Patient Rights

AWHONN considers access to affordable and acceptable health care services a basic human right (AWHONN, 2016). With regard to the nurse’s role in meeting the health care needs of patients, AWHONN advocates that nurses adhere to the following principles:

- Nurses should not abandon a patient, nor should they refuse to care for someone based on personal preference, prejudice, or bias.
- Nurses have the professional responsibility to provide impartial care and help ensure patient safety in emergency situations and not withdraw care until alternate care is available, regardless of the nurses’ personal beliefs (American Nurses Association, 2015).
- At the time of employment, nurses are professionally obligated to inform their employers of any values or beliefs that may interfere with essential job functions. Nurses should ideally practice in settings in which they are less likely to be asked to assist in care or procedures that conflict with their religious or moral beliefs.

Federal and Institutional Protection of Nurses’ Rights

Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 protects workers (applicants and employees) from employment discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, or participation in certain protected activities. With respect to religious protection, Title VII applies to most U.S. employers and requires reasonable accommodation of the religious beliefs, observances, and practices of employees when requested, unless such accommodation would impose undue hardship on business operations. These protections do and should continue to apply to nurses and other health care professionals.

A nurse should retain the right to practice in his or her area of expertise following a refusal to participate in an abortion, sterilization, gender reassignment surgery, or any other procedure. This refusal should not jeopardize the nurse’s employment or subject him or her to harassment. In addition, one’s moral and ethical beliefs should not be used as criteria for employment, unless they preclude the nurse from fulfilling essential job functions. AWHONN believes that these rights should be protected through written institutional policies that address reasonable accommodations for the nurse and describe the institution’s required terms of notice to avoid patient abandonment.

REFERENCES

