



Peer Assistance

The International Nurses Society on Addictions (IntNSA), as a professional organization of nurses with specialized interest and expertise in the field of addictions, has adopted the following position regarding the lives of nurses whose health and professional practice have become impaired due to an addictive disease.

IntNSA members are concerned that our colleagues are at risk for this fatal illness. This risk is a result of many factors. Among those are:

- access to prescription drugs
- the stresses of the occupation, and
- the overall lack of knowledge regarding addictive diseases.

IntNSA is concerned that the profession is consistently losing nurses due to the:

- professional denial of the problem
- judgmental attitudes regarding the impaired health care providers, and
- the lack of knowledge regarding impairment, prevention, early intervention programs, and available referral, treatment and support.

As a result of addictions, nursing licenses can be suspended. This often results from the late identification of the nurse with abuse and dependency problems. The lack of collegial response, as well as insufficient education may be factors in the late identification of peers with problems.

While recognizing that nursing practice can become impaired due to physical, mental, and addictive diseases, addiction to alcohol and other drugs is, by far, the most common cause. This paper applies to all addictions: alcohol, other drugs, and eating disorders, as well as sexual, gambling and spending addictions. Addiction is defined as the continued use of any mind-altering drug, or behavior that interferes with important areas of the person's day-to-day life.

Position statement

IntNSA supports a nationally consistent mechanism for identifying, intervening with, treating, and supporting nurses with addictive diseases. A nurse is as susceptible to addiction as is any other individual. The nursing profession, as other professions, is highly reluctant to identify the addicted nurse until the disease is well advanced. Although the exact number of addicted nurses is unknown, IntNSA advocates collegial action whenever any nurse is affected.

IntNSA affirms its belief that the nursing profession bears the responsibility to intervene with and support an ill colleague, with the goal of restoring the individual to health and practice. In addiction, in order to maintain standards of the profession, the practice of nurses who do not respond to treatment must be addressed promptly and appropriately. We must balance the public



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interest with that of our peers. Furthermore, IntNSA believes the nursing profession can meet these responsibilities by promoting action in the areas of education, workplace policies and peer assistance programming.

Education

Education about the addictive diseases, including the risk to health care professionals, is essential in the preparation of students of nursing. Education in nursing schools has traditionally focused on the physical consequences, rather than the etiology and treatment of the diseases. IntNSA strongly believes we have an obligation to educate nurses as recommended in the IntNSA position paper, "Addictive Disorders Among Nurses and Nursing Students in Academic Settings." In addition to completing a nursing curriculum regarding addictions and impaired practice, nurses need to keep abreast of current research and treatment in addictions as well as the programs available in their state and local area to assist with impaired practice. Furthermore, any institution which employs nurses should have mandatory inservice education about addictive diseases with continued education credit, and a clear departmental or institutional policy regarding intervention with a nurse whose practice is impaired. IntNSA encourages state boards to employ diversion programs and state nurses associations to implement outreach and prevention programs, which include educational opportunities at all hospitals, assistance with developing policies, and employee assistance programs. Minimally, this education should provide an understanding of addictive diseases, including prevention, identification, intervention, treatment and peer support.

Workplace policies

Businesses have demonstrated the cost effectiveness of identification and treatment of employees whose job performance has become impaired due to addictive diseases and/or other emotional problems. However, institutions employing nurses have generally lagged behind in providing such services. IntNSA believes that all institutions employing nurses should have a policy, developed by nurses, regarding nurse employees whose job performance is affected by an addictive disease, similar to policies regarding other health problems. This policy should be supported by the institution's senior management. A nursing supervisor's responsibility should include training in identification and early intervention. Employee assistance programs should be developed and promoted to employees. All employees should be informed that such employee assistance programs are available. Employee assistance program staff should be knowledgeable in addictions, trained in the techniques of intervention, and capable of appropriate referral.

Peer assistance programs

IntNSA believes that each state should design and implement a peer assistance program. The program may vary from state to state, but IntNSA believes that the following program elements are essential:

- personnel with knowledge of addiction in the nursing profession, training in intervention, and an awareness of referral options,
- preservation of civil rights of nurses including confidentiality and the right to legal counsel, an information system, which may include hotlines, advocacy for colleagues, and



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credibility with colleagues, which may include peer assistance groups in liaison with professional associations and regulatory agencies: and

- availability of community, state-wide and national networks of nurse-specific support and specialty groups, employee assistance programs, self-help meetings, treatment programs, and a clear focus on the prevention and non-punitive early intervention with the goal to return to practice in the current place of employment.

Resources for support of nurse colleagues

As a mechanism of supporting nurses recovering from addictions, IntNSA promotes the concept of nurses from across the country reaching out to the recovering nurse. To aid in this process, the IntNSA Peer Assistance Committee maintains a directory of resource persons. IntNSA is available to State Boards of nursing, state nursing organizations, individuals and groups of nurses as a resource in the development of programs and policies.

IntNSA firmly believes that a nurse in need of treatment should be referred to a state-of-the-art resource. A resource for such programs, therapists, and agencies is available through the Peer Assistance Committee, local chapters, and individual IntNSA members.

Whether treatment should be inpatient, residential or out patient depends on the individual's needs, the severity of the illness, the support systems available, and the professional determination of the treatment provider.

The International Nurses Society on Addictions supports the recovering nurse who faces the difficult task of re-entry into practice and other stages of illness and recovery. IntNSA believes an effective Peer Assistance program is a critical element in the treatment and rehabilitation of an addicted nurse. Nurses are valuable. They are not immune from illness. As we advocate for our colleagues, the elements of peer assistance provide a framework for helping peers, for partnering with state nursing organizations, regulatory agencies, and providing safe care to our patients.

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