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Nurse Practitioners May Soon Admit and Discharge Patients in Hospitals

By: Cynthia L. Heinz and Cathi Mietkiewicz | Toronto

The Ontario provincial government has proposed amendments to the Hospital Management regulation [1] under the Public Hospitals Act[2] ("PHA") that would allow Nurse Practitioners ("NPs")[3] to admit and discharge patients from hospitals. Currently physicians, dentists and midwives are the only health professionals that may admit and discharge hospital patients in Ontario. If the amendments are passed Ontario will be the first jurisdiction in Canada to permit nurse practitioners to admit and discharge hospital patients.[4] The amendments allow NPs to begin discharging patients as of July 1, 2011 and to begin admitting patients on July 1, 2012.

The government news release states that these amendments support their plan to "provide better access to health care services while improving quality and access for patients".[5] The move is supported by both the Registered Nurses’ Association of Ontario[6] and the Nurse Practitioners’ Association of Ontario.[7]

Nurse Practitioners

NPs are Registered Nurses with additional training and are authorized to perform additional controlled acts. NPs have obtained post-baccalaureate education and have passed an Extended Class examination approved by the College of Nurses of Ontario. NPs have seen their scope of practice expanded in recent years and have been given added responsibilities. In addition to the controlled acts that can be performed by all registered nurses, NPs are also authorized to prescribe certain drugs, communicate a diagnosis in certain circumstances and order the application of certain forms of energy (e.g. diagnostic ultrasound).

Considerations for Hospitals

Currently many hospitals employ NPs and/or have granted privileges to NPs who are not employed by the hospital to diagnose, prescribe for or treat out-patients in the hospital. Once the amendments come into effect, both NP employees and those NPs with privileges in hospitals will be permitted under the Hospital Management Regulation to admit and discharge patients. In preparation for the enactment of these regulatory amendments, hospital boards that currently grant privileges to NPs will need to review their by-laws to see if the by-laws either (i) delineate the privileges of NPs, in which case those provisions will need to be amended in order to authorize NPs to admit and discharge patients; or (ii) give the hospital board the authority to delineate the privileges of NPs on a case by case basis based on the recommendations of the Medical Advisory Committee ("MAC").

The credentialing functions of the MAC of each hospital will remain the same. Specifically, the MAC is responsible for making recommendations to the hospital board with respect to: every application for appointment or reappointment of medical staff, dental staff, midwifery staff (the "Professional Staff") or NP Staff, the hospital privileges to be granted to each member of the Professional Staff or NP Staff and the dismissal, suspension or restrictions of hospital privileges of any member of the Professional Staff or NP staff. MACs may wish to develop criteria that it can consider when making recommendations to the Board as to whether an individual NP’s privileges should include the ability to admit and discharge patients.

The hospitals that currently employ NPs will need to decide if they want to alter their policies in order to allow NPs to admit and discharge patients. For hospital boards that do not currently employ or grant privileges to NPs they may want to re-consider that position in light of the new responsibilities this legislation gives to NPs and the contention that these responsibilities will improve efficiencies within hospitals. Should a hospital wish to allow NPs to admit and discharge patients, the hospital may wish to review its insurance coverage to ensure adequate liability coverage is in place.
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[3] Nurse Practitioners are also known as Registered Nurses, Extended Class; this Bulletin uses NP throughout.  
[4] Nurse Practitioners are allowed to admit and discharge hospital patients in Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States.  

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