Delegation Considerations for Nursing Practice

What are the considerations nurses should evaluate before delegating tasks to nonnursing care providers?

Peg Currie, RN, BSN, MA, replies:

Everyone remembers their nursing licensure examination and the feeling of overwhelming relief once the passing scores were in. Although that was a great feeling, ongoing licensure carries with it some significant responsibilities. The nursing license is the individual agreement between the nurse and state governing bodies committing the nurse to function competently and within the Nurse Practice Act.

Each state has a nursing quality governing body known as the Board of Nursing or the Nursing Care Quality Commission. These governing bodies are responsible for defining nursing practice and overseeing licensure, quality, and ongoing nursing competency. The key role for these governing bodies is to serve to protect the public.

The Nurse Practice Act is the basic enabling law for licensure and the definition of nursing practice in the jurisdiction of the legislative body establishing the Act. This Act defines who may practice nursing. In the Nurse Practice Act, the RN Scope of Practice states how nursing may be practiced. Delegation is discussed within these regulations.

RN Scope of Practice and Delegation

The RN Scope of Practice as defined by the Washington State Nursing Care Quality Commission, and similarly in other states, describes the RN role as:

- Assessment, nursing diagnosis, setting goals, planning care strategies, implementing care, delegating care to qualified others, supervising, evaluating, teaching, managing care, maintaining patient safety, collaborating with other health care members.

Because of concerns about the nursing workforce shortage and the continued cost escalation within the health care industry, it is imperative that we understand how to manage the “delegation” aspect of the role of nursing to fulfill accountabilities outlined in the RN Scope of Practice.

Competency

When discussing delegation within nursing practice, it is important to understand competency and how it is determined for the nursing specialty area. Competency is an ongoing process; it is the ability to integrate knowledge, skills, and judgment to practice safely and ethically in a designated role.

Also, as nurses, it is important to understand what “competency” means for unlicensed assistive personnel or other nonnursing care providers. (For the purposes of this article these personnel will be called “delegatees.”) Most states have certifications or registries specifying approved skills for different types of caregivers.

Next, how is competency determined for the unit or work environment? What do the delegatee’s skills include? Review the approved skills from the state. Then evaluate the detail of the approved skills from the department or work setting specific to the patient population. Once you are aware of the activities that the delegatees are competent to perform, judgment and decision making come into play.
Considerations

1. What potential patient safety issues or risks may be related to the task considered for delegation?3

2. What is in the best interest of the patient?3

3. Is the delegatee approved to perform the competency skills of the task?3

4. What is the delegatee’s level of experience and understanding?4 Assess his or her knowledge base and ability.5

5. What are the unique characteristics of the patient’s needs at this time?5

6. Delegate only those tasks that the delegatee can be expected to perform safely for the patient under the current circumstances.3

7. Although nursing tasks may be delegated, the nursing process functions of assessment, evaluation, and judgment must not be delegated.3

Once the assessment of the delegatee and patient care needs are considered, decisions on what to assign are made. Clear communication is critical. Remember to set expectations that are concise and identify the outcomes you want to see from the delegatee. Clear communication will serve to support delegatees in not only delivering care as to the plan, but will support them in succeeding in their role.

Supervision and Accountability

The RN Scope of Practice also describes the supervisor role of the RN. Throughout the shift, assess the delegatee’s progress on the assignment, provide further clarification as needed, and adjust activity as care needs require. Ask the delegatee for questions. Use the opportunity to mentor, support, and coach performance, and recognize good performance. Creating a good relationship with the delegatee will result in better care for patients and a more fulfilling work environment for everyone. Discuss with the delegatee if there were better ways to do things that can be considered in the future. This collaboration will add satisfaction to the work environment and create respect through listening and valuing ideas.

Summary

The work environment changes throughout a busy shift; each situation needs to be evaluated differently. Ensuring patient safety through appropriate delegation is the goal. Use the listed considerations as a way to support nursing judgment in the delegation of tasks.


References


