

Pain Management

Safe and competent care of the management of pain involves appropriate and effective assessment by the professional nurse. Under treatment of pain continues to be a major public health problem. Inadequate pain control may result from nurses' lack of knowledge about pain assessment and management and/or their misunderstanding of the safety and efficacy of opioid analgesics, drugs that are essential for the management of moderate to severe pain.

The Board of Nursing recognizes that the profession nurse shares in the responsibility for the assessment and management of pain. The Board encourages professional nurses to view effective pain management as part of nursing practice for all patients with pain, whether it is acute or chronic. It is especially important for patients who are experiencing pain at the end of life. Professional nurses should be knowledgeable about the safe and effective methods of pain management as well as the statutory requirements related to the use of controlled substances.

The Board recognizes that opioid analgesics are subject to abuse by individuals who seek them for mood altering and other psychological effects rather than for legitimate medical purposes. The professional nurse who administers these drugs in the course of treatment should be diligent and incorporate established safeguards into their practices to minimize the potential for abuse and diversion of controlled substances.

The Board also recognizes that opioids can cause life-threatening respiratory depression if they are not administered at appropriate doses and at appropriate dosing intervals. Nurses should be knowledgeable about the signs and symptoms of impending respiratory depression and about the risk factors that increase the likelihood of the occurrence of this drug side effect. However, excessive and inappropriate concerns about respiratory depression should not lead to nursing practices that deprive patients of doses needed for effective pain control, especially to those patients who are experiencing pain at the end of life.

The Board of Nursing is disseminating this white paper to support and encourage safe, competent and high quality nursing care for persons with pain.