



The Nova Scotia College of Nursing is the regulatory body for licensed practical nurses (LPNs), registered nurses (RNs) and nurse practitioners (NPs) in Nova Scotia. Our mandate is to protect the public by promoting the provision of safe, competent, compassionate and ethical nursing services by registrants.

Note that the term 'nurses' in this document refers to LPNs, RNs, and NPs inclusively.

## Overview of this Guideline

In this guideline, we describe the nurse's accountabilities related to their duty to provide care and provide examples of what is and is not considered abandonment. In addition, we also identify the obligations of the employer and nurses in formal leadership roles including supervisors, managers and administrators.

Nurses are accountable for their actions, decisions and the impact of their decisions at all times. They are also responsible for appropriately establishing, maintaining and ending therapeutic relationships. Nurses have an ethical and legal responsibility and a duty to continue to provide care for the balance of an assignment until the care has been transferred to an appropriate care provider.

## What is Abandonment?

Abandonment occurs when a nurse discontinues the nurse-client relationship or refuses an assignment without:

- Arranging for suitable alternative or replacement services and ensuring their arrival.
- Allowing the employer a reasonable opportunity to arrange alternative or provide replacement services. What is reasonable in one context may not be reasonable in another. Reasonableness will vary depending on the specific circumstances of the situation and is established through discussion and consultation.
- Negotiating with the employer to develop a mutually acceptable plan for withdrawal of service.

Nurses must not abandon clients; this would be considered professional misconduct. Abandonment only applies to situations where the nurse has established a nurse-client relationship or has accepted an assignment.

## Examples of Abandonment

The following situations are generally considered client abandonment:

- Leaving the care area without taking steps to ensure a safe transition to a replacement, including providing any applicable reports
- Being unavailable to provide care due to other activities not related to client care (i.e. personal phone calls, texting, gaming, sleeping, etc.)
- Leaving work prior to the arrival of your replacement, even if replacement is late or a no show, without providing notice to your employer and a reasonable opportunity to arrange an alternative or replacement. The length of notice required may depend on the urgency of the situation and the risks to health and safety of both the client and the nurse.
- Refusing to provide care for a client after you have accepted responsibility.
- Refusing to extend your shift to allow the employer a reasonable opportunity to provide an alternative or replacement



- Knowingly transferring the care of a client to another category of care provider without the necessary professional competencies to manage the care, impacting the safety of the client

The following situations are not considered client abandonment:

- Declining offers for overtime or extra shifts in which you have not been previously scheduled to work
- Resigning with notice as required by employer policy or contractual obligation. However, if a resignation is effective during a client assignment, you must arrange for a suitable replacement or allow your employer a reasonable opportunity to arrange a replacement

## Refusing an Assignment

There may be occasions where refusing an assignment is acceptable. However, it should not be done without full consideration of the risk doing so may pose to clients. You are obligated to provide your employer reasonable notice to find a replacement care provider if you refuse an assignment. Additionally, it is important to note that you may be required to provide care or service until an appropriate replacement care provider is found.

It may be appropriate to refuse an assignment:

- For valid personal reasons, including fatigue.
- When performance of an intervention puts the client at greater risk than not performing it.
- When you lack the basic nursing competencies to provide safe care, unless the employer has implemented a plan to assist you to gain them.
- Where there are inadequate resources or unreasonable expectations that may place the client at risk.

Nurses are accountable to understand the parameters of abandonment and what it means to themselves, their team, their employer and their clients.

## Employer Obligations

Employers are responsible for sufficient staffing and ensuring that staff have the required competencies and the available resources needed to provide safe care.

Nurse Managers, who includes supervisors and administrators, are accountable to support staff safety and well-being and enable nurses to meet their professional responsibility to provide safe, competent, compassionate and ethical care.

Nurse Managers must ensure safe care by striving to provide sufficient staff to meet the client care requirements and promote practice environments where fitness to practise can be maintained.

Nurse Managers may contribute to abandonment and may be found to have breached the standards of practice and/or code of ethics if they fail to make reasonable efforts to ensure sufficient resources including staff, information, guidance and support.