

Drugs : The Nurses' Responsibility

Rules for the ordering, use and custody of drugs

R. F. Timoney, M.Sc., Ph.D., M.P.S.I.

WE are constantly aware of the dangers resulting from administration of over-dosage, it is equally important that a patient in urgent need of a drug should not receive an innocuous amount resulting from a diminution in activity caused by improper storage. The nurse who is responsible for the custody of drugs in a hospital ward should satisfy herself that the precautions taken in regard to their storage guarantee a minimum loss in potency. When there is doubt about the optimum storage conditions for a particular drug or preparation, the hospital pharmacist should be consulted or, if there is no pharmacist in the hospital or nursing home, the manufacturers will always supply the necessary information on request.

The nurse's responsibility for the custody and use of drugs which are controlled in regard to purchase and supply by legal regulations is an important and special one.

The Supply of Dangerous Drugs

Apart from administration by or under the supervision of a registered medical practitioner or a registered dentist, it is unlawful to supply or procure any dangerous drugs or preparation unless he (she) is authorised to procure or supply such drugs and such procuring or supplying is in accordance with the conditions of the authority. The extent of the authority to possess dangerous drugs varies in different cases. The authorisation for dangerous drugs in hospitals, infirmaries or health centres is not given to the institution itself, but certain groups of persons, by virtue of their duties, are authorised to possess and supply dangerous drugs so far as is necessary for the practice or exercise of their profession or employment.

The following persons are authorised in a hospital :

- (a) A registered pharmacist, engaged in dispensing medicines,
- (b) A sister or acting sister in charge of a ward or outpatients' department.
- (c) A matron or acting matron of a hospital where medicines are not dispensed by a pharmacist.

Acquisition

A sister or acting sister in charge of a ward or outpatients' department may obtain dangerous drugs from the hospital's pharmaceutical department (pharmacy) only on a written order signed by her.

Matrons or acting matrons may not procure dangerous drugs except on an order signed by a medical practitioner employed in the hospital.

Storage of dangerous Drugs

All authorised persons, except patients and messengers, must store dangerous drugs in a locked recept-

acle, except where the practice of their profession or employment otherwise requires.

Supply of Dangerous Drugs for Ward Stock

Dangerous drugs are supplied for from the pharmacy by the pharmacist to a ward or outpatients' department on a written order signed by the sister or acting sister in-charge. The order is marked by the pharmacist in a suitable manner to indicate that it has been complied with, and is then retained in the dispensary for a period of two years. A record of the order should also be kept in the ward or department for two years. In some hospitals the record is kept in the ward or department stock book, in others a separate book is used for keeping records of dangerous drugs. The latter procedure is preferable if it can be carried out. The dangerous drugs are administered only in accordance with the directions of a medical practitioner. If the dangerous drug is administered to the patient under the direct personal supervision and in the presence of the medical practitioner no legal requirements need to be observed since it is regarded as administration. If the medical practitioner is not present a prescription is required.

In hospitals which do not employ a pharmacist, the matron or acting matron is given authority to possess and supply dangerous drugs to the patients, subject to the condition that the drugs are procured and supplied on an order signed by a medical practitioner.

Authorised Messengers

The Dangerous Drugs Act, 1934 specifies that messengers may be authorised for the purposes of delivery only. In a hospital, a porter may be required to collect drugs and preparations from the pharmacy and to deliver them to the wards. The regulations require that a messenger acting for the recipient must either be an authorised person or must bear a statement, signed by the recipient, empowering the messenger to receive the drug on his (her) behalf. Such a messenger would bring two statements, namely ;

- (a) the signed order and
- (b) the written signed authority to receive.

The messenger is only authorised to possess the dangerous drug for so long as is necessary to effect delivery. The only exception to this requirement concerns dangerous drugs supplied on a prescription of a medical practitioner—in such a case, the messenger need not be authorised.

Private Hospitals

A patient in a private hospital may receive a dangerous drug by :

- (a) administration by a medical practitioner ;
- (b) supply by a medical practitioner, observing the normal supply procedure for records, or
- (c) supply by a pharmacist on a prescription given by a medical practitioner.

A medical practitioner is entitled to keep stocks of dangerous drugs at a private hospital of his use. Such stocks are under the medical practitioner's personal authorisation and are available only for his use so that the dangerous drugs may not, for example, be transferred to another medical practitioner.

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