Role Overload
(high workloads or job demands)

Make sure you know the risks to safety at work so you and your colleagues remain safe.

Safer Work SAFER CARE

NSW NURSES & MIDWIVES' ASSOCIATION

Role overload is a WHS issue and can create risks to both the physical and psychological health and safety of nurses and midwives.

Role overload is recognised in the SafeWork NSW Code of Practice for Managing psychosocial hazards at work.

Too much to do or not enough workers to do the job

Unachievable deadlines, expectations or responsibilities

Unpredictable shifts or hours of work, shift structures or rosters that do not allow adequate time for you to recover

Frequent cognitively difficult work

Multiple tasks that require repeated rapid switching between each to complete them, so it is difficult to concentrate

Sustained or frequent exposure to emotionally distressing situations to continually show false displays of emotion, (e.g. remaining calm when being threatened)

Tasks and decisions that are **safety critical** and that that may have a serious impact on the health and safety of others

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What can be done to manage the risks of role overload?

Your employer has an obligation to ensure your safety at work. This includes doing everything reasonably practicable to make sure you are not exposed to role overload at work.

The law in this area has improved in the last few years and NSW now has a WHS Regulation on psychosocial hazards that employers must follow and a Code of Practice for Managing Psychosocial Hazards at Work[1].

Your employer must consult you and your health and safety representatives (if any) when deciding how to manage hazards, including role overload.

Your employer should take the following steps:

1. IDENTIFY THE HAZARD

Your employer must identify role overload in your workplace. Ways to identify role overload include:

- through consultation with staff and their representatives
- psychosocial risk assessment tools, such as *People at Work*
- review of workloads, shift arrangements, rosters, records of hours work, missed meal breaks and overtime
- identification of where vacancies have existed or extended working hours are required for a period of time
- absenteeism, turnover, exit interviews, sick leave data and workers' compensation claims
- requests for inpatient specials not approved (or taken from existing staffing)
- work health and safety incidents and reports
- staff complaints or records that reflect ongoing concerns being raised about role overload

2. ASSESS THE RISK

Your employer must consider the likelihood of exposure to role overload causing harm to staff as well as how severe that harm could be.

They should consider:

- which workers are most at risk and affected?
- are the identified risks organisation wide or do they apply to specific groups of nurses/midwives or specific work tasks?
- what controls are currently used to eliminate or mitigate the risks identified and how effective are these controls?
- what controls could reduce the risk(s) to the lowest practical level?

Particular consideration should be given to the risks arising from cumulative exposure to multiple psychosocial hazards (e.g. role overload plus occupational violence and bullying).

3. CONTROL THE RISK

Your employer must do everything reasonably practicable to eliminate the risks associated with role overload. This could include things like:

- rostering enough staff with an appropriate skill mix to do the job safely
- ensuring models of care and treatment plans for patients/residents/consumers identify the required numbers of staff and skills mix
- have a system to provide extra workers when needed
- monitor rostering arrangements and overtime to ensure sufficient breaks between shifts and to make adjustments to provide individuals with greater rest
- reviewing decisions made when extra staffing is requested to ensure adequate resourcing is provided
- ensure timely actions are taken in relation to complaints and concerns about role overload

4. REVIEW

Your employer must review the controls that have been put in place to manage the risks of role overload to make sure they are effective. You should be consulted as part of this review.

What can I do if I believe there are role overload related risks to my health and safety at work?

1. **Raise your concerns through the normal channels in your workplace.** Be sure to do this in writing. This may include things like putting in an incident or hazard report on your internal system and/or sending an email to your manager. It will assist in the resolution of concerns if you are able to measure and document where role overload risks are present in the work environment

2. **Talk to your Health and Safety representative** (if you have one) about your concerns

3. If the issue remains unresolved, **contact the NSWNMA for more advice and assistance** on (02) 8595 1234 or gensec@nswnma.asn.au

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