

1978 S.C. Op. Atty. Gen. 182 (S.C.A.G.), 1978 S.C. Op. Atty. Gen. No. 78-149, 1978 WL 22617

Office of the Attorney General

State of South Carolina

Opinion No.

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August 7, 1978

*1 (1) A physician's assistant can carry out administrative tasks and conduct routine tests such as checking blood pressure, weight, etc., for a new patient but cannot perform any task requiring the exercise of independent medical judgment or medical interpretation; moreover, all tasks performed by a physician's assistant must be individually approved by the State Board of Medical Examiners.

(2) A physician's assistant cannot write patient care orders except when a physician is physically present and dictates to the assistant; under no circumstances can a physician's assistant prescribe medicine.

TO: Eugene F. O'Connor
President
South Carolina Academy of Physician's Assistants

QUESTION:

Is a physician assistant completely precluded from performance of administrative tasks and routine tests on new patients by regulation?

STATUTES AND CASES:

Regulation Number 81-100(2) and (7)(a) of the State Board of Medical Examiners.

DISCUSSION:

Regulation 81-100(7)(a) of the State Board of Medical Examiners states that no physician's assistant may 'examine any new patient not previously examined by the supervising physician or his/her referring physician.' In the context of this subsection, the word 'examination' does not preclude the physician's assistant from conducting normal administrative tasks and routine tests for the new patient. For example, he or she may be able to take the new patient's case history, blood pressure, urinalysis, weight, temperature, and the like.

The physician's assistant may not perform any task which requires the exercise of independent medical judgment. This means that the 'examination' of a new patient within the purview of the regulation may not include interpretation of test results, diagnosis, treatment, or authorization of further tests by the physician's assistant. He is not allowed to use his own discretion in the examination. The new patient should, therefore, be seen by the physician; and it must be the physician who interprets the test results, diagnosis, and treats the new patient.

Even though the physician's assistant is not precluded by the regulations from performing these routine tasks, the tasks themselves must be individually approved by the State Board of Medical Examiners in accordance with Regulation 81-100(2).

Your inquiry further concerns the question of whether the physician's assistant may write patient care orders in a hospital environment. The responsibility for patient care orders and the prescribing of medication lies solely with the physician and may not be assumed by the physician's assistant. Such orders require independent medical judgment, which can be exercised only by the physician. The only instance in which the physician's assistant may write the patient care orders is when the physician is physically present and dictates to the physician's assistant what to write. The possibility of judgmental error or inadvertence is too great to allow a physician's assistant to write such orders. Under no circumstances may a physician's assistant prescribe medicine for a patient.

*2 Kay G. Crowe
Assistant Attorney General

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