

Ask ECRI: Developing a Policy on Patient Substance Use

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Guidance

Full Text

A member recently asked for guidance on creating a policy regarding patients that appear to be under the influence of drugs and other substances (e.g., cannabis, opioids, benzodiazepines, hallucinogens, stimulants) upon arrival for their appointments.

In our response, we noted that the primary goal of any patient substance use policy is to ensure the patient's safety and well-being as well as of staff and other patients and visitors.

The policy should define "under the influence" and other related terms (e.g., "impaired," "intoxicated," "drunk," "high") and these definitions should be consistent with the definitions used in an employee policy on drug and alcohol use. Sample language may say: "A patient is considered under the influence if they exhibit signs of impairment, such as slurred speech, impaired coordination, disorientation, or other observable behaviors indicating substance impairment."

The policy should then outline the procedure for staff to take when encountering a patient considered under the influence of a substance. Consider the following:

1. Assess the patient's condition. The policy should include who can conduct the assessment, what the assessment consists of (e.g., both a physical and mental examination), when the assessment should take place, and the requirements for documentation.
2. Determine whether to provide or withhold care. Include how staff can make this determination. In general, a patient who is intoxicated, yet in stable condition, should be rescheduled.

The Department of Veterans Affairs provides a flowchart entitled [Determining what to do when participant is using a substance or under the influence during an assessment or therapy session](#). The flowchart describes steps to take if the person passes or fails the assessment (e.g., ask follow-up questions to determine how the participant will get home, monitor the patient/check vitals, complete an incident report, notify authorities, provide support materials or referrals). Keep in mind that this flowchart was intended to be used by nonurgent or emergent-care providers. Additional actions may be necessary if the patient requires emergency treatment or stabilization, either because of their condition or due to the nature of treatment they were originally seeking. For cases where treatment is to be withheld, you will need to follow any legal, ethical, and standard of care requirements; therefore, be sure to consult with legal counsel.

3. Escalating actions. In some situations, the patient may turn violent. Therefore, the policy should include procedures for de-escalating, calling law enforcement, and, if necessary, restraining the patient. Consult your organization's legal and ethical department regarding what to do in these situations.

4. Documenting actions. All interactions with patients under the influence, including assessments, decisions made, and actions taken, should be thoroughly documented in the patient's medical record.

The following resources focus on other care settings (e.g., emergency department, dentist) but include useful information for developing a policy or procedure:

- [Clinical Practice Guidelines for Assessment and Management of Patients with Substance Intoxication Presenting to the Emergency Department](#)
- [Frequently Asked Questions About Substance Use and Dentistry](#)
- [Under the Influence: Should You Treat the Patient?](#)
- [In-hospital Substance Use Policies: An Opportunity to Advance Equity, Reduce Stigma, and Offer Evidence-based Addiction Care](#)
- [Sample Substance Use and Possession Policy \(hospital\)](#)

The recommendations contained in Ask ECRI do not constitute legal advice. Facilities should consult legal counsel for specific guidance and develop clinical guidance in consultation with their clinical staff.

Classifications

CARE SETTINGS

Hospitals | Ambulatory Health Care Facilities

DISEASES

Substance-Related Disorders

PSYCHIATRY AND PSYCHOLOGY

Drug-Seeking Behavior | Marijuana Use | Recreational Drug Use