

PATIENT SAFETY ALERT

THE IMPORTANCE OF PHYSICIAN-LED ANESTHESIA CARE

Patients in all communities, of all income levels, including in rural or underserved areas, deserve access to physician-led care. Yet there is increasing pressure to expand the scope of practice for mid-level healthcare providers in the name of expanding access to care. We have seen attempts by nurse anesthetists, who are currently required to practice under the prescriptive order of a physician, surgeon or dentist, to instead call for further expansion of their ability to practice without any physician oversight. **But lowering patient safety standards in certain settings is not the solution - all patients deserve the safest protections and care by properly trained, credentialed practitioners.**

To be clear, nurse anesthetists are an essential part of the physician-led anesthesia care team. But the risk comes when nurse anesthetists try to practice beyond their skills and training. **Unfortunately, these risks became very clear recently at two hospitals in the Central Valley that were cited for closure and patient care violations by state and federal oversight agencies due to patient harms occurring from nurse anesthetist-led care.**

Anesthesiologists are licensed physicians who have completed:

- 4 years of medical school
- 4 years of advanced training through internship and residency programs, and
- 12,000-16,000 hours of clinical training.

That extensive preparation enables them to make difficult diagnoses, treat patients with complex medical conditions, and intervene to manage life-threatening complications that may arise during surgery or treatment.

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A nurse anesthetist is not the same as, and cannot replace, an anesthesiologist.



Recent investigations by the CA Department of Public Health and Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services have demonstrated that patients were harmed, and there was a lack of proper oversight of Certified Registered Nurse Anesthetists (CRNAs), and a lack of proper credentialing at Stanislaus Surgical Hospital and Doctor's Medical Center in Modesto. Complaints were received about anesthesia-related medical errors, and the investigative surveys found fault with the medical credentialing process for CRNAs.

The Modesto Bee

modbee.com

“The state agency issued an “immediate jeopardy” order at Stanislaus Surgical on Jan.17, citing the potential harm to patients posed by unsupervised CRNAs. It did not lift the order until a plan was approved Feb. 2 that put physician anesthesiologists in charge of anesthesia services at the surgical hospital.”

“The surveys concluded that CRNAs operated outside their scope of practice at the surgical hospital.”

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“ I don't feel comfortable going there, to be honest, knowing that all this is going on.”

- Patient Corina Fezi of Modesto

“ The regulatory survey was sharply critical of CRNAs' performance at Stanislaus Surgical. In November, a CRNA decided to give a patient with kidney failure Celebrex and another drug prior to surgery, prompting the nurse to question the order due to the patient's abnormal lab readings.”

Allowing nurse anesthetists to lead anesthesia care in these facilities was irresponsible, lowered the standard of care, and created major risks for patient safety.

“ If there's a problem during or after surgery, it's important to have a physician anesthesiologist there to address the issue. Between medical school, a four-year residency and other training, anesthesiologists have 16,000 hours of training, while a nurse anesthetist has 1/6th of that.”

- Antonio Hernandez Conte, MD, MBA, FASA,
Past President, California Society of
Anesthesiologists

“ The survey report described CRNAs working alongside students studying to be nurse anesthetists, in one case changing a doctor's order for general anesthesia for surgery to a higher-risk spinal anesthesia and sedation. It was one of a number cases in which there was no record that patients gave consent for a change in anesthesia drugs, the report said.”

“ Stanislaus County hospital is removed from the Medicare program over health, safety issues.”



The situations at Doctor's Medical Center and Stanislaus Surgical Hospital in Modesto provide a clear warning sign as California looks at how to provide safe patient care, and how to stretch limited healthcare staffing resources.

Compromising patient safety is not acceptable. Preserving the physician-led anesthesia care team approach is essential to adhere to appropriate patient safety standards, while we work to increase the pipeline of both physicians and nurses through expanded training and residency programs.

Physicians and nurses are both essential – but they are not interchangeable. The physician-led anesthesia care team is the right solution – there are different roles, different jobs, with different training. But physician leadership and involvement is essential to ensuring patient safety.