



# CONSUMER NEWS

## SAN DIEGO CITY ATTORNEY'S OFFICE

### HEALTH CARE ASSISTANT CLASSIFICATIONS—GENERAL DIFFERENCES BETWEEN AN RN, NP, PA, LVN, CNA

November 2013

Every consumer during his or her life will need some degree of medical treatment, whether for general health maintenance or acute care. Depending upon the patient's needs, there are numerous classifications of health care assistants which may attend to a patient. This newsletter discusses the most commonly known of the multiple classifications and provides links to obtain additional detailed information, including the statutes, regulations and education requirements governing each area of practice.

#### *REGISTERED NURSES*

A registered nurse (RN) in California is licensed and regulated by the Department of Consumer Affairs' (DOCA) Board of Registered Nursing (BRN) ([www.rn.ca.gov/](http://www.rn.ca.gov/)). The BRN also licenses and regulates nurse practitioners, clinical nurse specialists, nurse anesthetists and psychiatric/mental health nurses. Refer to the BRN website for detailed information.

A licensed RN can provide direct and indirect patient care services that ensure the safety, comfort, personal hygiene, and protection of a patient, and the performance of disease prevention and restorative measures.

Direct and indirect patient care includes the administration of medications and therapeutic agents necessary to implement a treatment, disease prevention, or rehabilitation regimen ordered by a licensed doctor. A licensed RN can perform skin tests, immunization techniques, and withdraw blood from veins and arteries. A licensed RN can observe signs and symptoms of illness, reactions to treatment, general behavior, or general physical condition, and determine whether the signs exhibit abnormal characteristics. California law governing RNs encompasses and allows many other specific practices too numerous to list in this newsletter. Visit BRN's website for details ([www.rn.ca.gov](http://www.rn.ca.gov/)).

#### *NURSE PRACTITIONER*

In California, nurse practitioners (NP) are also regulated through the BRN. NPs are licensed registered nurses who have been "certified" through the BRN as an NP because they meet additional education and skill requirements in physical diagnosis, psycho-social assessment, and management of health-illness needs in primary health care. NPs generally have a master's degree. (An individual may qualify for basic licensing as an RN with an associate's or

bachelor's degree) NPs are supervised by licensed physicians. An NP can prescribe certain drugs once the NP complies with BRN requirements and Federal Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) guidelines. For detailed information on NPs, visit [www.rn.ca.gov](http://www.rn.ca.gov).

#### *PHYSICIAN ASSISTANTS*

A Physician Assistant has specialized medical training through graduate programs associated with a medical school, to which admission generally requires prior health care experience. To practice in California, each PA must pass a rigorous national examination before being licensed by the Physician Assistant Board, which is part of the California Department of Consumer Affairs' Medical Board of California. ([www.pac.ca.gov](http://www.pac.ca.gov)). A PA's duties are delegated and supervised by a licensed physician and include providing patient diagnostic, therapeutic and preventive health care services. A PA, among other medical duties, can take medical histories, order and interpret laboratory tests and X-rays, make diagnoses and treat minor injuries. A PA can also prescribe certain drugs once the PA complies with PAB requirements and DEA guidelines. For additional information on PAs, visit [www.pac.ca.gov](http://www.pac.ca.gov).

*LICENSED VOCATIONAL NURSES*

A licensed *vocational nurse* (LVN) in California is regulated and licensed by the DOCA’s Board of Vocational Nursing and Psychiatric Technicians ([www.bvnpt.ca.gov](http://www.bvnpt.ca.gov)). An LVN practices under the direction of a licensed doctor or RN. An LVN becomes licensed after meeting the Board’s educational requirements and passing a State examination. Visit the Board’s website to review education and examination requirements ([www.bvnpt.ca.gov](http://www.bvnpt.ca.gov)). An LVN can perform many, but not all, of the same health care services as those of a licensed RN. For instance an LVN can furnish and provide certain licensed doctor prescribed medications to a patient, but may not provide advice and education to patients and their families about ways to manage their health conditions. For additional information on LVNs, visit [www.bvnpt.ca.gov](http://www.bvnpt.ca.gov).

*CERTIFIED NURSING ASSISTANTS*

In California, Certified Nursing Assistants (CNAs) provide RNs and LVNs assistance in hospital settings with patient care in areas such as personal hygiene, taking vital signs, feeding and basic medical care. CNAs also provide long-term care to the elderly and disabled in skilled nursing facilities (SNF) and home settings.

The California Department of Education (CDE) oversees CNA training programs which can be provided at approved educational institutions, hospitals

or SNFs consisting of classroom and on-the-job training (<http://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/ct/rp/cn/a07summary.asp>). The classroom portion must include at least 60 hours of coursework. However, to become qualified for certification as a CNA, the student must also complete at least 100 hours of on-the-job clinical practice supervised by a licensed RN or LVN whose only duty is to manage students in training. Once the classroom and on-the-job training programs are completed, a student must pass a CNA examination to become certified as a CNA.

California law allows nursing assistants who have passed their competency examination to work at hospitals and SNFs as “nursing assistants” and not “certified nursing assistants.”

Complaints about CNA *programs* are handled by the CDE (<http://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/ct/rp/cn/a07summary.asp>). However, the California Department of Public Health’s Aide and Technician Certification Section oversees CNA *certification* (<http://www.cdph.ca.gov/certlic/occupations/Pages/HealthCareProfessionals.aspx>). The Department also regulates the hospitals and SNFs where CNAs often work. Therefore, complaints about CNA *practices* are investigated by the Department of Public Health (<http://www.cdph.ca.gov/services/Pages/ComplaintsCaliforniaHealthCare.aspx>).

*CITY ATTORNEY’S ROLE*

The licensing and regulating agencies discussed above refer their criminal investigations to the City Attorney’s Office for

prosecution. This office has prosecuted several agency cases. These prosecutions assist the agencies in protecting consumers from harmful practitioners while helping ensure the practitioner either has the necessary education and licensing, or is prohibited from practicing in the profession. If you have a complaint against any of these practitioners, be sure to contact the regulating agency so your concern can be properly addressed.

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**San Diego  
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Newsletter written by R. Wharton.

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The information provided in this newsletter is intended to convey general information and is not intended to be relied upon as legal advice.

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The San Diego City Attorney’s Consumer & Environmental Protection Unit prosecutes criminal and civil violations of California’s unfair competition and other consumer laws committed in the City of San Diego. The Unit maintains a Phone Hotline for consumers to report possible violations. You can reach the Hotline at **(619) 533-5600**.