



Protecting workers from infectious diseases and hazardous chemicals position statement

1. Purpose

This position statement sets out the minimum responsibilities the Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation (ANMF) considers employers should meet to protect nurses, midwives and assistants in nursing from the risks associated with exposure to infectious diseases and hazardous chemicals at work.¹ It should be read with the ANMF position statements: *Workplace health and safety*; *Personal protective equipment*; and *Vaccination and immunisation*.

2. Definitions

Infectious diseases are caused by infectious agents such as bacteria, viruses, parasites, fungi or their toxic products. They can be passed from one person or animal to another. Transmission can occur directly (i.e. through contact with bodily discharge), indirectly (e.g. by sharing a drinking glass) or through vectors (e.g. mosquitoes who carry and transmit the disease).

Hazardous chemicals are any substance, mixture or article classified under a hazard category in the Globally Harmonized System (GHS) of Classification and Labelling of Chemicals.² They pose a range of health hazards including irritation, sensitisation, and carcinogenicity. They may also pose physical hazards if they are flammable, corrosive or explosive.

3. Context

All workers have the right to a healthy and safe working environment. This includes the right to be protected from infectious diseases such as COVID-19 and hazardous chemicals such as glutaraldehyde, peracetic acid, formaldehyde, latex and cytotoxic drugs. In Australia, these rights are protected through state, territory and national WHS laws and regulations which compel employers to take protective action.

4. Position

Prevention

It is the position of the ANMF that:

1. Workers, including nurses, midwives and assistants in nursing, have the right to be protected from infectious diseases such as COVID-19 and the right to be protected from hazardous chemicals.
2. Nurses and midwives have a responsibility to ensure the care they provide to a person with an infectious disease is the same as the care they provide to others. This is part of their duty of care.
3. Employers must uphold these rights and support workers to meet their duty of care by collaborating with WHS committees, health and safety representatives (HSRs), staff, unions, and experts to develop and implement an effective risk management system that includes high order controls and safe work practices that eliminate or reduce exposure and risk.
4. To this end, employers must ensure:
 - a. all work practices promote safety and eliminate or minimise risk and are based on up-to-date evidence about disease transmission and the safe use of substances

¹ Assistants in nursing refers to all care workers however titled.

² For more information about the Globally Harmonized System (GHS) see <https://www.safeworkaustralia.gov.au/safety-topic/hazards/chemicals/classifying-chemicals/using-ghs>.



- b. the following controls are in place:
 - safe ventilation and air movement management systems
 - safe handwashing, cleaning and surface sanitising practices
 - safe people movement and people placement measures (entry, exit, proximity etc)
 - vaccination for infectious diseases when available (provided and paid for by the employer)
 - safe-design sharps products that protect workers during their use (for example needleless systems and retractable needles) are used wherever possible.
5. Employers must have these higher order controls in place before relying on personal protective equipment (PPE), the lowest order control.

Protection

6. For PPE, employers must have policies and practices in place to support the safe use of PPE as a last defence measure when indicated.³
7. Employers must also:
 - a. consult with workers, including nurses, midwives and assistants in nursing, and unions to develop and implement effective policies and practices, including risk control measures, for:
 - minimising the risk of transmission of airborne infectious diseases
 - safely handling blood and body fluids
 - safely using hazardous substances
 - safely using PPE when indicated by clinical and risk assessments
 - b. provide all workers with access to:
 - up-to-date information (including hazard logs, safety data sheets and health monitoring) about any substances to which they may be exposed and the associated risks
 - up-to-date information about any infectious diseases to which they may be exposed
 - c. provide workers with the necessary resources to comply with all relevant state, territory and national legislation and regulations, and workplace policies, procedures, practices and controls
 - d. provide education and training for all workers in all safety policies and practices and provide adequate clinical supervision until workers achieve competency
 - e. provide and fund voluntary testing and immunisation where available (and mandatory testing only when required by a government health directive or for the purposes of registration).

5. Position statement management

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³ This includes policies and practices to support the mandated use of P2/N95 masks for all workers providing care to a person suspected or confirmed to have COVID-19 and fit-testing all masks provided to nurses, midwives and assistants in nursing as per Australian Standard (AS/NZS1715:2009). See the ANMF position statement *Personal protective equipment* for additional requirements specific to the use of PPE.