

Insubordination vs Unsafe Performance

I am a nurse working in an oncology unit in a teaching hospital. I rotate all three shifts (7-3, 3-11, 11-7). I have requested several times that all my nights be blocked together but with no response. Recently I worked Monday through Friday days, then was rotated to Saturday night. Sunday I wasn't able to sleep during the day because of noise in my apartment building from neighbors moving in. At 7 pm Sunday I called in explaining that I had not slept for 35 hours and I thought it would be unsafe for me to work in this sleep-deprived state. My nursing director told me she needed me to come in and work, despite my exhaustion. Should I refuse this order and be insubordinate to my boss?

-RN

Dear RN

Your situation is so typical of the ethical dilemmas of our life and work. There are some important "goods" and "ends" that we would all acknowledge: caring for the health and alleviating the suffering of cancer patients; maintaining a consistent working culture without insubordination to directors and managers; keeping your job and high performance level. But now there is a conflict between the pursuit of some of those real goods. There may be a difference in judgment on what the priorities are, though I suspect the manager as well as you would say the patients' health and care trumps the other things. The manager may think an exhausted you on duty is better for patients than a rested someone else. The immediate challenge is to keep the communication lines open and find a creative, win-win solution. The longer term challenge is to improve the scheduling approach to protect all significant players and factors.

Pray: ask God for wisdom and for special strength for the day. Consult: don't decide rashly or on your own. Talk it through with your small group and with trusted colleagues. If you push your boss that you really must stay home and rest, try to give her/him a positive solution, like a colleague you have checked with who is willing to sub for you tonight. Longer-term: do some research on how other hospitals and clinics deal with these scheduling issues. Approach nursing schools and professional associations with the issue and ask for ideas and help and (if need be) support. Always think win-win.