

Illness versus Impairment

Susan K. Blank, M.D., LFAPA, DFASAM
Medical Director
Georgia PHP

Healthcare workers are sometimes concerned that if their employer or a licensing board is aware of an illness, like depression or anxiety, or substance use, it may affect their job or their licenses to practice. This fear frequently impacts their willingness to seek treatment or support.

The Georgia Composite Medical Board in the Medical Practice act, defines Impairment as: " *the inability of a health care professional to practice with reasonable skill and safety to patients by reason of illness or use of alcohol, drugs, narcotics, chemicals, or any other type of material, or as a result of any mental or physical condition.* (1).

Impairment is a functional state that causes the provider to be unable to provide safe care. According to the Federation of State Physicians Health Program, the key differences between illness and impairment are:

While impairment, by definition, implies the presence of illness, the presence of illness does not necessarily result in impairment. A person can have a chronic illness such as diabetes or depression without being impaired.

Impairment is a dynamic functional state that focuses on the current ability to work safely regardless of the underlying cause.

Illness is often chronic while impairment is acute. An illness can predate impairment by years, while impairment can be a temporary state needing immediate intervention.

Providing safe, high-quality care is fundamental to physicians' obligations to promote patient welfare. Yet, a variety of physical and mental health conditions—including physical disability, medical illness, and substance use—can undermine physicians' ability to fulfill that obligation. If caused by an illness, early intervention often prevents the transition to impairment.

The Georgia Professional Health Program (GAPHP) provides a confidential assessment, referral for evaluation and treatment, if needed, along with oversight leading to a safe return to practice. With health status monitoring, GAPHP can serve as an advocate for the individual. Consultation is available regarding concerns by those at risk in advance of formal claims of impairment. GAPHP is required by statute to provide a confidential, therapeutic, non-disciplinary approach regarding potential or actual impairment. Working with the GAPHP allows a provider to obtain the care and support needed before an illness or substance use leads to impairment and the undesirable consequences that may follow.

For more information www.gaphp.org

1. OCOGA: **Chapter 360-11 GEORGIA PROFESSIONAL HEALTH PROGRAM Rule 360-11-.01 Definitions**
2. Federation of State Physician Health Program, *Public Policy Statement on Physician Illness, Disability, and Impairment: Differentiation and Responsibility*. April 6, 2022.