

HEALTH CARE WORKER SAFETY

POSITION

Nurses have the right to a safe and secure workplace in which to provide quality patient care. The American Nurses Association (ANA) is working to protect nurses from workplace injury and infection in a variety of ways, including lobbying for legislative and regulatory initiatives and adequate resources to ensure a workplace that is free from avoidable physical dangers.

BACKGROUND

Working in a health care facility is reported to be one of the most dangerous jobs in the United States. The Department of Labor reports that a health care worker in a nursing facility is more likely to be injured on the job than a coal miner. Health and safety threats in the nursing workplace include: infectious diseases, physical violence, ergonomic injuries related to the movement and repositioning of patients, exposure to hazardous chemicals and radiologicals, and sharps injuries.

In a national survey of RNs conducted by ANA in 2001, 88 percent of working nurses reported that health and safety concerns influence their decisions to continue working in the field of nursing as well as the kind of nursing work they choose to perform. Fewer than 20 percent of the nurses in this survey felt very safe from work-related injury and illness in their current work environment, 40 percent had been injured on the job in the past year. Over three-quarters of the nurses surveyed (76 percent) indicated that unsafe working conditions interfere with their ability to deliver quality care.

Often, these injuries and infections could be avoided by the proper use of technology, environmental controls, and protective equipment. Yet, nurses are often denied access to these protections. ANA maintains that it is incumbent upon the federal government and individual health care facilities to: provide adequate workplace safeguards such as risk-reducing devices and equipment; enforce protective procedures that minimize risks; educate staff concerning risks; provide personal protective equipment; utilize safety engineered sharps, and; cooperate with research into actual and potential risks.

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RATIONALE

Improving the health and safety of the health care workplace is a key to solving the growing nursing shortage. As Congress works to develop ways to stop the exodus of nurses from the bedside, and to attract new and dedicated nurses to the profession, the importance of including health and safety considerations in our strategies for improving working conditions should not be overlooked nor underestimated. ☺

SAFE PATIENT HANDLING AND MOVEMENT

POSITION

The American Nurses Association (ANA) supports actions and policies that result in the elimination of manual patient handling. Patient handling, such as lifting, repositioning and transferring has conventionally been performed by nurses. The performance of these tasks exposes nurses to increased risk for work-related musculoskeletal disorders. With the development of assistive equipment and devices, such as lifting equipment and lateral transfer and friction reducing devices, the risk of musculoskeletal injury can be eliminated or significantly reduced. A Safe Patient Handling and Movement (SPHM) program decreases injury to nurses, other health care workers and patients, while reducing work-related health care costs and improving the safety of patient care delivery.

BACKGROUND

Over the past decade, much attention has been given to the health and safety concern among health care workers. The extent of musculoskeletal disorders among the U.S. nursing workforce is particularly distressing when considered in the context of the current nursing shortage. Estimates report that 12% of nurses leave the profession annually due to back injuries and greater than 52% complain of chronic back pain. Specifically, injuries secondary to patient handling tasks compound factors driving the shortage such as aging of the nursing workforce, declining retention and recruitment rates, and lowering social value of nursing.

Despite the recognition that manual patient handling is a high-hazard task, the incidence of musculoskeletal disorders persists at high rates for nurses and other nursing personnel—signaling the need for continued action. Emerging efforts to prevent musculoskeletal injuries have concentrated on reducing exposures through the use of assistive equipment and devices for patient handling. Last year, nine states (CA, FL, HI, IL IA, MA, MI, NJ, WV) introduced Safe Patient Handling and Movement legislation, while five states enacted legislation (OH, TX, NY, WA, RI). ANA supported these legislative initiatives, and will continue to seek new ways to advance this issue on both the state and federal level.

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RATIONALE

Over the last two decades, health care has rapidly become one of the most dangerous industries in the United States. Unfortunately, health care workers, particularly nursing personnel, experience a disproportionate rate of occupational illness and injuries compared to the private sector in general. More than any other work-related injury or illness, musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) are responsible for lost work time, the need for protracted medical care, and permanent disability among health care workers.

- Every day the average nurse lifts 1.8 tons per shift, as a result, nurses suffer debilitating and often career-ending and life-altering injuries from repeatedly lifting, moving, transferring, and repositioning patients.
- Back injuries affect up to 38% of all nurses.
- Patient handling, transfers and manual lifting are significant risks factors for back injuries.
- Recent changes in the health care environment have lowered staffing levels; such downsizing requires individual nurses to care for more patients even as fewer people are available to assist.

ANA has strong evidence that current working conditions in health care are contributing to increased injury and disease among nurses as well as driving the exodus from bedside nursing care. Additionally, technologically feasible and cost-effective solutions to controlling ergonomic hazards (such as mechanical patient lifting equipment and patient lateral transfer devices) now exist and have been successfully implemented in hospitals and nursing homes across the country. 🇺🇸