

SAFE PATIENT-HANDLING: INFORMATION YOU NEED TO KNOW



In order to establish a safe environment of care for nurses and patients, legislation was effective on July 7, 2006 that requires hospitals and nursing facilities in Rhode Island to create a safe patient handling committee. 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, such as lift and transfer devices, the risk of musculoskeletal injury can be significantly reduced. Effective use of assistive equipment and devices for patient handling creates a safe healthcare environment by separating the physical burden from the nurse and ensuring the safety, comfort, and dignity of the patient.

Over the past decade, ergonomic hazards have emerged as a primary health and safety concern among health care workers. Despite vast recognition, the incidence of musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) persists at high rates for nursing personnel, thus signaling the need for continued action.

Nursing & Musculoskeletal Disorders

- Patient-handling tasks are the primary cause of MSDs among nurses. Of greatest concern are back injuries and shoulder strains, both of which can be severely debilitating.
- Patient-handling tasks are typically performed manually and often repetitively, and include such movements as lifting, transferring and repositioning patients.
- 38% of RNs have suffered occupational-related back pain severe enough to require taking leave from work.
- There is no safe way to manually lift a physically dependent adult patient.

Manual lifting and moving of patients and residents in the health care industry can be a risky business. Nurses who assist these dependent patients and residents have a high risk of injury, and patients and residents risk accidental drops or falls. Moreover, if a nurse who is assisting dependent patients and residents suffers a musculoskeletal injury, the health care facility faces a severe financial burden, thus contributing to excessive losses for the entire industry.

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Nursing & Musculoskeletal Disorders (continued)

The Rhode Island safe patient handling committee will provide input into the development of a written safe patient handling program in each facility, conduct a handling hazard assessment, train all clinical staff on safe patient handling policies and annually evaluate the program. By 2008, a safe patient handling policy will achieve the maximum reasonable reduction of manual lifting, transferring and repositioning of all or most of a patient's weight, except in emergency, life threatening or otherwise exceptional circumstances.

This new legislation will benefit patients and nurses in Rhode Island. The potential for patient injury as a consequence of a manual handling mishap will be reduced by using assistive equipment. The potential for injury to nurses will also be reduced. This is especially important when considered in the context of the current nursing shortage. It is estimated that 12 percent of nurses leave the profession annually due to back injuries and greater than 52 percent complain of chronic back pain.

Effectiveness of Safe Patient-Handling Equipment

The Rhode Island law also mandates hospitals to acquire the much needed lifting equipment and provide staff training. Such equipment typically includes mechanical lifts, transfer aids, and new beds and chairs with ergonomic features. The facility will receive a tax credit when purchasing the lifting equipment.

- The use of assistive patient-handling equipment and devices has essentially rendered unnecessary the act of strict "manual" patient handling as a function of nursing care.
- Assistive patient-handling equipment and devices control the ergonomic hazards associated with patient handling by technologically "engineering out" the energy/force imposed on the nurse during the act of lifting, transferring or repositioning patients.
- Cost-benefit analysis have shown that assistive patient-handling equipment successfully reduces workers' compensation costs for MSDs.

Specialty Medical Equipment can assist your facility in implementing this new safe-lifting mandate. Please call 781-844-5929 for more information.

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