

Protecting Caregivers' Health and Preventing Injuries Safe Patient Lifting

Issue Hospitals recognize that nurses and other caregivers are the foundation of patient care, which is why protecting *their* health is of the utmost importance. Towards this end, hospitals provide training and education on proper lift procedures. Whenever feasible, hospitals provide medical devices designed to help prevent back and other injuries, making the caregiver's jobs safer. These devices assist caregivers in transferring patients, including those permanently installed in patient rooms; portable devices such as maneuverable slings and transport chairs; and other technology like lateral transfer devices and repositioning aids.

Hospitals rely on nurses' expertise to make decisions about what's best for a patient. And when patients need to be transferred, nurses and other caregivers must have flexibility in making those decisions. This is especially critical in an emergency, when a patient's life could hang in the balance.

The Nurse and Healthcare Worker Protection Act of 2009 (H.R. 2381/S. 1788) would require hospitals to eliminate all manual lifting of patients by hospital staff, except where using a mechanical lift would compromise patient care." The National Nursing Shortage Reform and Patient Advocacy Act (S. 1031) would require the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) to establish a standard barring all patient lifting in hospitals, with no exceptions. Such measures would adversely affect hospitals' ability to appropriately respond to patient needs in a timely manner.

The standard would apply to all health care facilities including hospitals, nursing homes, home health care and long-term care facilities. In addition, the "no lift" policy would extend to all categories of patients, even infants. The bill also authorizes RNs and other health caregivers to refuse to accept an assignment if they have not been trained to utilize patient lifts and establishes "whistleblower" protections for nurses and civil penalties against a health care facility for violations of the "whistleblower" provisions.

View Our goal is to provide a safe environment for patients and caregivers; however, the language of pending legislation does not achieve that goal. Though well-intentioned, these measures contain unreasonably strict guidelines that could jeopardize – and even prevent – proper patient care. The AHA and ASHHRA oppose mandates for specific methods of handling patients.

Manual lifting is appropriate in some circumstances, such as holding or transferring an infant or when the use of a lift is likely to pose a risk of injury to the patient or the employee. Eliminating all manual lifting within a hospital setting is an unreasonable constraint and may be detrimental to patient care, especially in an emergency situation where time is critical. In addition, total elimination of patient lifting unreasonably restricts caregivers' flexibility to determine the most appropriate method to lift, transfer or otherwise assist in moving patients. There are many methods that can be used to safely lift patients. It is within the purview of the caregiver team to determine the most appropriate method. Furthermore, restricting manual lifting only to times when a government official has declared a state of emergency fails to take into account the emergencies that happen every day in a hospital – when quick thinking and action can save a life.