



System Safety in Healthcare

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Reducing Work-Related Risks for Healthcare Workers is Bound to Improve Patient Safety

Nursing ranks among the worst occupations in terms of work-related injuries. Studies have shown that in a given year, nearly half of all nurses will have struggled with lower back pain. When nurses suffer, so do their patients. The costs to hospitals are enormous. Researchers estimate that medication errors and patient falls that occurred as a result of nurses' health issues incurred as much as \$2 billion annually on the health care system. "We have money bleeding out the back door because we don't have a healthy work force," said Susan Letvak, an associate professor of nursing at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro [Ref. 1].

Fatigue contributed to more than 1,600 events reported to the Pennsylvania Patient Safety Authority (PPSA) since 2004. Thirty-seven of those incidents were adverse events, with four of them leading to patient deaths. Medication errors and mistakes related to a procedure, treatment or test made up 88.5 percent of the events related to fatigue. The most significant error risk involves nurses working 12.5 hours or longer [Ref. 2]. Note that these include only the reported errors. Unreported errors are 10 times higher, according to a *Washington Post* article.

The Joint Commission, through a Sentinel Event Alert, reports that fatigued workers can exhibit the following conditions [Ref. 3]:

- Lapses in attention and inability to stay focused
- Reduced motivation
- Compromised problem-solving
- Confusion
- Irritability
- Memory lapses
- Impaired communication
- Slowed or faulty information processing and judgment
- Diminished reaction time
- Indifference and loss of empathy

Paramedics face similar issues, according to the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work

[Ref. 4]. But all healthcare workers deal with a wide range of activities that pose a threat to their health and may even cause occupational diseases or work accidents. The risks are usually physical, chemical, biological, ergonomic and psychosocial.

How Can Hospitals Help Nurses Proactively?

The primary efforts to implement regulations and guidelines addressing healthcare worker fatigue has targeted limiting hours worked, but a more comprehensive approach is needed. Growing awareness of the risks of fatigue in the health care industry has led the Joint Commission to issue a directive to all healthcare organizations to undertake a fatigue risk assessment and implement a fatigue risk management plan [Ref. 5].

The European Agency for Safety and Health at Work makes the following recommendations for handling patients:

- Encourage patients to move themselves
- Use transfer and lifting devices, if possible
- Ask for help if you are uncertain whether you can handle a patient safely
- Check that brakes of wheelchairs and beds are locked
- Tell the patient what you are going to do
- Do not let the patient hold on to you or your clothes
- Try to avoid lifting – transfer the weight instead
- Push or pull instead of carrying
- Aim for the minimum distance and height difference between starting and end points
- Hold the patient close to your body
- Avoid bending forwards or sideways
- Do not twist your trunk
- Move smoothly
- Make sure you can always see where you are stepping
- Keep your balance



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- Remember to move the patient, do not let the patient move you
- Be dressed in a way that does not limit your movement
- Wear supportive and stable non-slip footwear
- Consult a physician if you suspect any musculoskeletal damage

Infections are also an important issue for healthcare workers. They may be exposed to MRSA and *C.difficile* infections. They should be encouraged to get a swab test annually. Hospitals should sanitize surfaces like door knobs, toilet handles, bed rails, call buttons, etc. with sanitizers. For example, *C.difficile* bacteria have to be eliminated through bleach-based sanitizers only. Alcohol only will not do [Ref. 6].

Depression is also a significant issue. One in eight U.S. workers has been diagnosed with depression, according to a recent Gallup poll. Many of them “look perfectly fine yet are suffering tremendously on the inside,” said David Mischoulon, M.D., Ph.D., a staff psychiatrist at Massachusetts General Hospital and Harvard Medical School. Under the Americans with Disabilities Act, employers must make reasonable accommodations for an employee suffering from major depression. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends employers implement health-related services for depression. These include Employee Assistance Programs that offer counseling to workers with depression, and training to help managers better recognize the signs and symptoms [Ref. 7].

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