“Rates of musculoskeletal injuries from overexertion in healthcare occupations are among the highest of all U.S. industries.”

IT HAPPENS in health care facilities every day.

A male resident begins to get out of bed, and a Certified Nurses’ Assistant (CNA) attempts to help him stand. The resident starts to fall, and the CNA tries to catch him, lowering him to the floor. The CNA then reports straining her back and shoulder. The resident is unharmed, but could well have been injured in a fall. In a separate incident, a female resident, weighing 170 pounds, requires assistance transferring from her wheelchair to her bed. Two CNAs attempt to help. Afterward, both report lower back pain. These scenarios are typical of what
happens in skilled nursing facilities, assisted living locations, home care and in acute care hospitals every day, leading to a growing number of injuries to staff, patients and residents.

The CDC reports that “rates of musculoskeletal injuries from overexertion in healthcare occupations are among the highest of all U.S. industries.” Data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics show that in 2014, the rate of overexertion injuries averaged across all industries was 33 per 10,000 full time workers. In contrast, the numbers are alarming in the health care industry. The overexertion injury rate was twice that average for hospital workers, over three times that average for nursing home workers, and over five times that average for ambulance workers. The single greatest risk? Manual patient handling.

With residents or patients it is not usually possible to move as close as would be ideal, and health care workers are often assisting in awkward or asymmetrical postures. Even when a patient is cooperative and unlikely to move suddenly, studies have found that the maximum weight that should be lifted in a direct care setting should be no more than 35 pounds.

**Put A Comprehensive Program In Place**

So, what can employers do to address these high risk activities? A.I.M. Mutual recommends introducing a comprehensive safe patient/resident handling program. While developing a new program may seem daunting, with the proper components in place, organizations can successfully mitigate this injury risk and reduce the likelihood of staff injuries.

Like any successful safety program, a Safe Patient Handling Program needs management commitment to providing staff with sufficient resources and support from the outset. In addition, an employer should:

- Conduct a needs assessment to obtain a baseline of existing safe patient handling resources in place.
- Use a participatory approach that actively involves front line staff and any parties who might affect the success of the program.
- Implement a strong policy.
- Provide staff with ready access to sufficient amounts and appropriate types of equipment.
- Train nursing staff to conduct functional mobility assessments of residents/patients to ensure that they are matched with the appropriate assistive device. (Train staff on the use of devices as well.)
- Monitor injuries associated with manual movement or handling of residents/patients.
- Conduct accident investigations and root cause analyses to help prevent recurrence.
- Establish program metrics and evaluate program effectiveness.

It is important to remember that no single component stands alone. They are all necessary for a successful and sustainable program.

**An Integrated Approach**

In addition, there is increasing recognition of the link between patient and worker safety in general and of the need for integrated approaches to protect staff and residents/patients. Fall and pressure ulcer prevention efforts are paramount and, optimally, they benefit both staff and patients/residents. In fact, a recent report from the Lucian Leape Institute concludes that “Workplace safety is inextricably linked to patient safety.”

**Expertise In The Health Care Industries**

A.I.M. Mutual’s Injury Prevention & Worksite Wellness staff can help your health care clients review or establish a Safe Patient Handling Program. For additional assistance with implementation of this type of programming, contact your Injury Prevention & Worksite Wellness Consultant directly or any member of your service team.

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