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Health Care

California Hospitals' I2P2 Plans Must Include Safe Patient Handling Rules as of Oct. 1



By Robert Iafolla

Sept. 30 — California regulations designed to protect health-care workers from injuries while lifting or moving patients took effect Oct. 1.

The Division of Occupational Safety and Health standard calls on hospitals to develop safe patient handling policies as part of their existing injury and illness prevention plans. The policies will require replacing manual patient handling with powered devices and lift teams as appropriate.

The new regulations require employee training and a recordkeeping system to track inspections of handling procedures, investigations of worker injuries and the evaluation, selection and placement of handling equipment.

The enactment of California's rules could increase movement toward a national standard. A parallel can be drawn to the communication of hazardous chemicals in the workplace, said Colin Brigham, past president of the Association of Safe Patient Handling Professionals.

As states developed their own hazard communication standards in the late 1970s and early 1980s, it became difficult for employers to comply with the patchwork of state regulations, Brigham told Bloomberg BNA Sept. 30. Multiple state regulations increased the demand for one uniform standard, which OSHA finalized in 1983.

A dozen states have passed laws related to safe patient handling.

California's Version

One advantage of California's safe patient handling standard that can't be easily reproduced is its connection with the state's injury and illness prevention program. That connection puts the new rules within an existing, funded and operating enforcement mechanism, Brigham said. Enforcement has been inconsistent in other states, he said.

Another notable feature of the standard is the role of the registered nurse, a position that carries greater authority in California than in other states, Brigham said.

The standard gives nurses the authority to assess the mobility needs of each patient to determine the appropriate handling procedures. Nurses are also supposed to be involved in selecting handling equipment.

California is the only state that regulates the number of nurses a hospital employs by setting minimums based on nurse-to-patient ratios (see related story).

Hospital Challenge, Management Buy-In

Designing safe patient handling policies will require hospitals to assess lift hazards in each department and come up with ways to address those hazards, said Gail Blanchard-Saiger, vice president of labor and employment at the California Hospital Association. Blanchard-Saiger said the standard doesn't go as far as to completely prohibit manual lifting.

"The challenge for most hospitals will be getting all of those departments together to put together one document," Blanchard-Saiger told Bloomberg BNA Sept. 29.

Ingela Dahlgren, executive director of Service Employees International Union-Nurse Alliance of California, agreed that a major challenge will be coordinating the different departments.

"That's why it's so important for management to buy into it," Dahlgren told Bloomberg BNA Sept. 29.

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BNA Snapshot

Key Development:

California's rules for safe patient handling take effect Oct. 1.

Potential Impact: The enactment of California's rules could increase movement toward a national standard.

For More Information

California's safe patient handling regulations are available at
http://www.dir.ca.gov/oshsb/documents/safe_patient_handling_apprvdtxt.pdf.

Contact us at <http://www.bna.com/contact/index.html> or call 1-800-372-1033

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