

HEALTH CARE WORKER SAFETY

POSITION

Nurses have the right to a safe and secure workplace in which to provide quality patient care. The American Nurses Association (ANA) is working to protect nurses from workplace injury and infection in a variety of ways, including lobbying for legislative and regulatory initiatives and adequate resources to ensure a workplace that is free from avoidable physical dangers.

BACKGROUND

Working in a health care facility is reported to be one of the most dangerous jobs in the United States. The Department of Labor reports that a health care worker in a nursing facility is more likely to be injured on the job than a coal miner. Health and safety threats in the nursing workplace include: infectious diseases, physical violence, ergonomic injuries related to the movement and repositioning of patients, exposure to hazardous chemicals and radiologicals, and sharps injuries.

In a national survey of RNs conducted by ANA in 2001, 88 percent of working nurses reported that health and safety concerns influence their decisions to continue working in the field of nursing as well as the kind of nursing work they choose to perform. Fewer than 20 percent of the nurses in this survey felt very safe from work-related injury and illness in their current work environment, 40 percent had been injured on the job in the past year. Over three-quarters of the nurses surveyed (76 percent) indicated that unsafe working conditions interfere with their ability to deliver quality care.

Often, these injuries and infections could be avoided by the proper use of technology, environmental controls, and protective equipment. Yet, nurses are often denied access to these protections. ANA maintains that it is incumbent upon the federal government and individual health care facilities to: provide adequate workplace safeguards such as risk-reducing devices and equipment; enforce protective procedures that minimize risks; educate staff concerning risks; provide personal protective equipment; utilize safety engineered sharps, and; cooperate with research into actual and potential risks.

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RATIONALE

Improving the health and safety of the health care workplace is a key to solving the growing nursing shortage. As Congress works to develop ways to stop the exodus of nurses from the bedside, and to attract new and dedicated nurses to the profession, the importance of including health and safety considerations in our strategies for improving working conditions should not be overlooked nor underestimated. ☺