

October 13, 2003

Tom Donahue  
President, United States Chamber of Commerce  
1615 H Street, Northwest  
Washington, DC 20062

Dear Mr. Donahue:

As president of the American Nurses Association (ANA), I am writing to ask the United States Chamber of Commerce to educate its members so that they are more fully informed regarding the negative implications for nurses, patients and business of a proposed ballot initiative by the Association of Washington Business to repeal the state of Washington's new ergonomics rules. If successful on November 4, this ballot, known as Initiative 841, would effectively block the Washington State Department of Labor and Industries from putting the rules, which were signed into law in 2000, into effect.

As you may know, back injuries that result from patient lifting are one of the top occupational injuries for nurses. Studies have revealed that a third of all nursing personnel are affected by back-related injuries and that it is actually safer to be a construction worker than to be a nurse in a hospital, or a mine worker rather than a nurse working in a nursing home.

This is unacceptable.

Other estimates report that 12 percent of nurses leave the profession annually as a result of back injuries, and more than 52 percent complain of chronic back pain. These alarming statistics tell us two things – that poor ergonomics hurts nurses, who are choosing to leave the profession rather than suffer unnecessarily, and that poor ergonomics hurts patients, whose safe nursing care is already threatened by the nation's escalating nursing shortage.

You may already be aware of the implications of the nursing shortage. A report released in July 2002 by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services details the projected shortages of RNs over the next two decades. It indicates that, if the nursing shortage goes unchecked, the deficit of RNs is expected to rise from 110,000, or 6 percent, in the year 2000, to 29 percent by the year 2020. This translates into a shortage of more than 800,000 RNs nationally by the year 2020. But the projections for Washington State are much worse. According to the report, Washington will have a critical 42.6 percent shortage by 2020.

In other words, nurses, whose population is aging (the average nurse in 2000 was 43.3 years old) are leaving the profession in droves, and often because they have either succumbed to or fear they will sustain a debilitating or disabling back injury or musculoskeletal disorder (MSD) as a result of unsafe patient handling. And the problem is especially acute in nursing home facilities, where annual staff turnover rates are commonly over 75 percent.

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But that is not all. Back injuries and MSDs also negatively affect businesses' bottom lines by increasing the number of lost-workday injury and illness cases and driving up the cost of workers compensation insurance for both long-term and acute-care employers.

In addition, studies and pilot programs have shown the cost-effectiveness of having strong ergonomics measures in place. For example, in one study involving the Glens Falls Hospital in upstate New York, patient-handling injuries were cut in half, while related workers' compensation costs decreased by 45 percent after the hospital implemented a new ergonomics program in January 2002. In a similar trial effort, BJC Health Care in St. Louis encountered success after instituting a zero-lift policy and is now implementing the program in its 13 other acute-care facilities. Specifically, it cost BJC \$160,000 in equipment and salaries, an expenditure that was well worth the effort given that it reduced injuries over three years from 129 worker MSDs, costing \$476,913 in claims, to 56 injuries, amounting to only about \$200,000 in claims. And finally, in a pilot program implemented in Washington State, a health care facility succeeded in reducing MSD injuries by 57 percent after using technology to lighten the load of patient lifts and transfers. So, in the long run, it does cost facilities less to invest in the proper training and equipment.

It is partially because of these types of ergonomics successes that in mid-September ANA launched "Handle with Care," a multi-faceted campaign aimed at promoting safe patient handling and preventing MSDs among nurses, and educating the business community and the general public on the benefits of proper lifting devices and techniques. And Washington State, which succeeded in passing legislation and adopting an ergonomics safety rule in May 2000, is being held up as a shining example of how strong ergonomics measures can rightfully protect nurses.

In closing, I am urging the United States Chamber of Commerce to back the nurses of Washington State in their quest to protect themselves from debilitating and disabling back injuries and MSDs, and to educate your members regarding the benefits of ergonomics protections – for nurses, patients and health care facilities alike. If you would like additional data and information regarding the economic benefits of proper lifting devices and techniques, the ANA will be happy to provide it.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

Barbara A. Blakeney, MS, APRN,BC, ANP  
President  
American Nurses Association

cc: Don Brunell, President  
Association of Washington Business

