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CPH-NEW Launches New Online Continuing Education for Nurses Program Aims to Reduce Muscle and Joint Injuries on the Job

LOWELL, Mass – The Center for Promotion of Health in the New England Workplace (CPH-NEW), a NIOSH Center of Excellence in Total Worker Health, has launched an online continuing education program to help nurses prevent musculoskeletal injuries in clinical care settings.

Sprains, strains and tears from overexertion and patient handling represent 45 percent of all worker injury cases among hospital workers. In Massachusetts, musculoskeletal injuries account for 25 percent of all workers' compensation lost-time claims filed by hospital workers.

The “Ergonomics in Healthcare” program, developed by CPH-NEW occupational ergonomics experts and faculty at the Solomont School of Nursing at UMass Lowell, offers 10 essential components of an effective prevention program to reduce patient handling injuries.

“This new online continuing education tool will help nurses protect their own health and advocate for comprehensive safe patient handling and mobility programs in their health care facilities,” says Laura Punnett, co-director of CPH-NEW and professor of occupational ergonomics in the Biomedical Engineering Department. “As a Total Worker Health Center for Excellence, CPH-NEW developed this program as one piece of the overall effort to prevent disabling injuries to nursing care staff.”

“It’s not appropriate to rely on nurses to use ‘good posture’ when working with patients,” Punnett adds. “It’s also essential to have patient lifting equipment and patient handling policies in place to prevent sprains and strains that can occur in the course of patient care tasks.”

Helping Nurses Meet the Demands of Caregiving

Nursing Prof. Barbara Mawn says that preserving the ability of nurses to meet the demands of caregiving is critical to the health care system.

“The national shortage of nurses will only intensify as the aging baby-boomer generation requires more health care services,” says Mawn. “Injuries should not be considered an inevitable part of the job. We need to make safe working environments for our nursing and health care workforce a top priority. This online program is a step toward safeguarding our nurse workforce and ensuring a safer workplace.”

The program reflects the latest science in ergonomics as applied to health care work and helps individual nurses understand how to keep themselves safe. The content was reviewed, shaped and endorsed by an expert advisory panel of nationally renowned health care, nursing and public health leaders. Researchers then field-tested it with professional working nurses.

“As someone who has been leading safe patient handling and mobility programs for almost 20 years, I welcome this brilliantly crafted continuing education program,” says Gail Powell-Cope, co-director of U.S. Veterans Center of Innovation on Disability & Rehabilitation Research and expert advisor to the Ergonomics in Healthcare program. “This program will help us achieve universal safe patient handling and mobility for all patients who require mobility assistance, and their caregivers.”

National Trend Moves Toward Safe Patient Handling Programs

Several states and professional organizations are leading coordinated initiatives to ensure safe patient handling equipment and programs in health care settings to protect workers. The Massachusetts Department of Public Health (MDPH) coordinates a stakeholder workgroup to support implementation of comprehensive safe patient handling programs in health care facilities.

A 2012 MDPH survey of Massachusetts hospitals revealed that most hospitals have taken some steps to improve patient handling to protect worker and patient safety. However, only 44 percent of hospitals reported having a written safe patient handling policy in practice.

“The Massachusetts Safe Patient Handling Stakeholder Workgroup is working to prevent patient handling injuries,” says Angela Laramie, an epidemiologist at the Massachusetts Department of Public Health and advisor to the Ergonomics in Healthcare program. “While many hospitals have a safe patient handling program in place, there is still work to be done to make sure state-of-the-art patient handling programs are available in every hospital.”

To learn more about the Ergonomics in Healthcare program, visit www.uml.edu/cphnewCE.

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