

SAFETY FACTS: BACK INJURY PREVENTION

In New Mexico, back injuries represent the second most costly accidents in the workers' compensation system. We include some suggestions to help reduce the incidence of these debilitating injuries:

- Management educates employees about the dangers of lifting
- Employees ask others for help when lifting heavy objects
- Through training, employees learn how to lift properly
- Management minimizes lifting tasks by providing lifting equipment and mechanical devices
- Repetitive motion injuries are prevented by stretch breaks and exercises
- Storage areas are adequate and accessible
- Loading docks are visible and well maintained
- Workers exercise, stretch or warm-up before work
- All equipment and materials are within reach of workers who need them
- Employees are trained in proper lifting for their specific, individual tasks
- Management provides new employees with special attention and supervision to ensure lifting is done properly
- If used, back support belts are worn properly and used only for lifting

Lifting Injuries Plague Health Care Workers

More than half of registered nurses and X-ray technicians suffer from injuries or chronic pain related to lifting, transferring or repositioning patients. It is not unusual for these health professionals to lift 200 pounds or more of dead weight by themselves many times per day. Construction workers use cranes, package delivery personnel use dollies, but most health care professionals are on their own.

Due to pain or injuries, significant numbers of these highly specialized and trained employees leave patient care each year. Patients can also be injured due to improper lifting or transfer techniques.

These injuries lead to higher workers' compensation and insurance costs, and drive many health care providers out of patient care. To compensate, various states are considering ways to protect employees. Here are a few of their recommendations:

- Require hospitals to provide mechanical equipment for the safe lifting and transfer of patients.
- Implement safe patient handling policies to prevent musculoskeletal disorders.
- Mandate staff training to ensure proper lifting or transfer techniques.
- Allow employees to refuse to perform – without fear of reprisal – any patient handling task that they believe may lead to an injury.
- Provide public assistance through reduced workers' compensation premiums and tax credits to cover the cost of mechanical lift devices and associated training.

SOURCE: "Study Uncovers Numbers of Lifting Injuries Among Health Care Workers." *Workers' Compensation Report*. April 11, 2006. Volume 17, No. 9, p. 179.