Preventing Back Injuries Fatality File



HOSPITALS FAIL TO PROTECT NURSING STAFF FROM BECOMING PATIENTS

When Tove Schuster raced to help a fellow nurse lift a patient at Crozer-Chester Medical Center near Philadelphia in March 2010, she didn't realize she was about to become a troubling statistic.

While working the overnight shift, she heard an all-too-common cry: "Please, I need help. My patient has fallen on the floor."

The patient was a woman who weighed more than 300 pounds. So Schuster did what nursing schools and hospitals across the country teach: She gathered a few colleagues, and they lifted the patient as a team.

"I had her legs – a corner of one of the legs, anyway," says Schuster, who was 43 years old at the time. "And as we swung her up onto the bed, I felt something pop. And I went 'ooo.' "

She finished the shift in pain and drove straight home to bed.

But after Schuster woke up late that afternoon, her husband, Matt, heard her shouting. He says he ran to the bedroom and found her crawling across the floor. "I thought it was a joke at first," he says. "And she says, 'I can't walk.' "

Schuster had injured her back moving the patient, which the hospital acknowledged. And today, X-rays of her back show how a surgeon repaired a damaged disk in her spine using a metal cage and four long, sharp screws.

"I can finally walk and sit again without being in excruciating pain," Schuster says. "But the career I had as a floor nurse is over."

According to surveys by the Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), there are more than 35,000 back and other injuries among nursing employees every year, severe enough that they have to miss work.

Nursing assistants and orderlies each suffer roughly three times the rate of back and other musculoskeletal injuries as construction laborers.

In terms of sheer number of these injuries, BLS data show that nursing assistants are injured more than any other occupation, followed by warehouse workers, truckers, stock clerks and registered nurses.

The number one reason why nursing employees get these injuries is by doing their everyday jobs of moving and lifting patients.