

Heavy lifting help

St. Elizabeth turns to technology to help take load off employees' backs

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STORY IMAGES



When nursing staffers are asked to lift 125 pounds, they get excited. At least its not 200 pounds, or 300, or more.

Patients are getting heavier, and nurses are working harder to get them from point A to point B.

St. Elizabeth Medical Center is trying to make life easier for its staff, and reduce the number of workplace injuries, with nearly \$1 million in new technology.

Some of it is very simple. Sheets of low-friction parachute-like material allow nurses and assistants to more easily reposition patients in bed or help them sit on the edge of the bed. The hospital, based in Edgewood, bought about 1,000 of them.

Among the other equipment is a motorized device that pulls a patient from sitting to standing and lift equipment designed to handle up to 1,000 pounds.

St. Elizabeth purchased about 80 pieces, made by Roselle, Ill.-based Arjo Inc. Which one is used depends on a patient's mobility and weight, but the technology will take a burden off the clinical staff no matter the size of the patient. It will be useful for post-surgical patients and anyone else who has trouble getting down or up.

"We lift constantly every day," said nursing assistant Amanda Clos. "By the time you get home, you're worn out."

The hospital is training its staff on the equipment and will begin putting it into use in the next few weeks.

About 30 percent of Americans 20 years of age and older, or more than 60 million people, are obese, according to the **U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention**.

More and more organizations are getting lifting equipment, though it's still a minority, said Nancy Hughes, director of the **Center for Occupational and Environmental Health** for the **American Nurses Association**.

"People who have worked in facilities with safe-patient-handling programs, they tend not to want to work in facilities that do not have the programs," Hughes said. "And the younger people look at some of the risks in the field and that can really turn them off from entering."

Registered nurses, nursing aides, orderlies and attendants rank high in **U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics** data of professions with the highest rates of strains and sprains. They're especially susceptible to back and shoulder problems.

St. Elizabeth had in mind not just changes in the patient population, but trends in the health-care work force, when it bought its new equipment.

Nurses are in short supply, and the work force is aging; in March 2004, the federal government said the average nurse was 46.8 years old, compared with 45.2 in 2000.

"If you plan to retire in this profession, there has to be a change in the way we do things," said Rod Sanchez, of **Diligent Inc.**, who has been training St. Elizabeth staff on how to use the equipment. "In what other industry do they expect people to lift 200 pounds without something to work with?"

Gail Myers, spokeswoman for the Health Alliance, said some of her group's seven hospitals have lifting equipment. **University Hospital**, for example, has a piece that can lift 1,000 pounds off the floor and a device to help patients stand, and the St. Luke Hospitals has an air-assisted patient transfer system.

Joyce Julien, director of therapy services at St. Elizabeth, said the equipment would be "a great recruiting tool" for clinical staff and ease the pressure on current staff.

It can take four people to move a 200-pound patient, she said, and heavier patients require more. With the new equipment, some of those jobs can be done with one person.

"Our goal is not to lift," she said.

Patients also appreciate not having to be picked up by a team of employees.

"There's a degree of dignity involved there," Julien said.

Taking a load off

With an aging supply of nurses, and ever-heavier patients, hospitals are turning to technology to help lift and move people. Sheets of parachute-like material help St. Elizabeth Medical Center employees reposition patients in bed.

Motorized lifting devices can pull patients from a sitting position to standing.

Other equipment hospitals are introducing can lift as much as 1,000 pounds off the floor.