

Advanced Practice RNs could be greater health care solution

By Tammy Hamilton
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Advanced Practice Registered Nurses want to be permitted to practice their profession in Charleston and all of West Virginia as they were trained and educated, i.e. without encumbrances placed on them by the Legislature. Nineteen other states and DC no longer have these restrictions and this has resulted in excellent health care for their citizens.

In over 120 studies, including studies from the American Medical Association, Advanced Practice Registered Nurses, or APRNs, have been shown to provide equivalent outcomes as physicians. It is argued that APRNs do not have the same amount of training as physicians or osteopathic doctors. However, APRNs typically practice as RNs for years, further their education by earning graduate degrees, complete comprehensive didactic and clinical training and then pass a national board certification examination before they can practice, ironically, a requirement not mandated for physicians in West Virginia.

Currently, state law requires that APRNs “collaborate” with a physician to have prescriptive authority. Recently the percentage of APRNs practicing with full autonomy has increased from 27 percent to 40 percent in the United States, with many other states having some degree of expanded authority. Most states have APRN practice regulations that are more favorable than West Virginia, including two of our border states, Kentucky and Maryland.

Unfortunately, under the current West Virginia law, patients may face losing their current APRN provider of choice if their APRN loses this “collaborative agreement” whether by physician choice, death or departure of the physician, etc.

Through the Affordable Care Act, there are more than 140,000 new Medicaid recipients in West Virginia. Many private physician practices don’t accept Medicaid. Who then will treat these patients? Additionally, in the face of this increased demand, one-third of West Virginia primary care physicians are age 60 or older. These physicians will soon be retiring at a time when there are not enough primary care physicians to take their place.

The AARP, National Governors Association, Institute of Medicine, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, Heritage Foundation, Cato Institute and many other highly respected organizations have weighed in, stating that APRNs should have full practice authority and be recognized as autonomous providers. The Federal Trade Commission has also concluded: “physician supervision requirements may raise competition concerns because they effectively give one

group of healthcare professionals the ability to restrict access to the market by another, competing group of healthcare professionals, thereby denying health care consumers the benefits of greater competition.”

This makes one wonder: Is the real concern about power or about providing quality health care for the citizens of our communities?

Citizens of West Virginia have the right to have access to quality health care. Our state has abysmal health statistics. Diabetes, heart disease, lung disease, cancer and obesity are rampant. Allowing well-trained APRNs to practice with fewer restrictions will provide this access and improve the well being of many West Virginians.