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Tracking infections helps save lives

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For the Monitor

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House Bill 602 would require ambulatory surgical centers to pay a fee (0.001 percent of gross revenue) to help finance the New Hampshire hospital infection reporting program, just like hospitals do.

As more and more surgeries are done in the outpatient setting, tracking surgical infections has become a priority for state public health departments across the country.

But recent amendments proposed by Reps. John Hunt and Andrew Manuse threaten the entire state infection reporting program. These amendments would not only wipe out funding entirely, but they would also make infection reporting voluntary (not mandated and not validated).

This would be a giant step backward in reducing patient harm, preventable deaths and the associated health care costs that patients are forced to bear. Just one surgical infection can add between \$12,000 to \$35,000 to a patient's bill.

Some of these infections force patients to exhaust their employee sick benefits, which then results in reliance on public assistance programs like short- or long-term disability, unemployment or even Medicaid. The physical, emotional and financial impact of health care associated infections can be devastating.

Who doesn't want health care costs to go down? Employers and employees are shouldering the burden through higher deductibles, less coverage, higher co-pays and more money taken out of their paychecks to go toward health insurance.

It's up to legislators and health policy leaders to exert pressure on all health care facilities to improve quality so costs can be held down.

Infection-reporting programs are a proven way to do just that.

The Centers for Disease Control, Medicare, and many leading national health care agencies have taken a strong position to support transparency in hospital infection reporting at the state level because it has proven to be the greatest driver of reducing patient infection rates and the associated health care costs.

I have the honor of serving on our state infection committee. This is a group of dedicated infection prevention professionals who work hard at tracking their facilities' infection rates, motivating their staff to adhere to known prevention methods and educating patients about the importance of speaking up about hand-washing and reducing infection rates.

They know that although this work is hard and sometimes tedious, not doing it would mean that too many patients would be harmed or die from a preventable infection.

The state program has provided education and training to hospital staff. It validates data reported by hospitals to ensure its accuracy and assembles the data into a yearly public report that can be used by consumers, health care facilities administrators, health care policy leaders and the media.

Wiping out our state hospital and ambulatory surgical center infection reporting program to save the centers the few dollars they will have to pay to fund the program is short-sighted.

These programs in 30 states have proven over and over to be about prevention. That's exactly what our state policymakers should be investing in.

(Lori Nerbonne of Bow is co-founder of New Hampshire Patient Voices.)