

AEDs in hotels, meningitis vaccines, medication coverage: Health briefs

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Preventing more cardiac arrest deaths

An AED, or automated external defibrillator, may be no more than just several feet away the next time you're staying in a hotel, inn or motel in New Jersey.

A bill that recently cleared the state Assembly Gaming, Tourism and the Arts committee in Trenton earlier this week would require hotels to have the lifesaving devices in the most populated areas of the hotels, including in each lobby, meeting room, banquet hall, fitness center and on each residential floor.

"Cardiac arrest can take place when you least expect it, such as when you are away from home, and we must ensure that we take every precaution to protect the lives of all those in New Jersey," Assemblyman Eric Houghtaling, D-Monmouth, said in a statement.

Heart attacks and sudden cardiac arrest, when the heart malfunctions and stops, are the leading causes of heart disease deaths among Americans, according to the American Heart Association.

AEDs are portable devices that have been proven to save people in cardiac arrest by delivering a shock to the heart through electrodes when the machine detects a heart rhythm.

"In the U.S. alone, more than 350,000 cases of cardiac occur outside a hospital every year," said Dr. Haitham Dib, cardiologist and chairman of the Heart Failure Program at AtlantiCare. "Having an AED can be a difference of life and death."

The new legislation is named after Michael Anthony Fornicola, who died May 29, 2012 after suffering a cardiac arrest at Harrah's Resort in Atlantic city. Bill sponsors said his family believes that his life could have been saved if an AED was available on his hotel room floor.

The new bill would require them to be easily accessible in hotels, inns, boarding houses, motels or other establishments that offer and accept payment for rooms, sleeping accommodations or lodging.

Current state laws require AEDs be present in nursing homes, gyms and health clubs, at school athletic events and in other public places.

"Your chances of survival with an AED are much higher, especially in the first few minutes, or the golden time," Dib said. "Any of us could experience a cardiac arrest at any time, and I'd want one nearby for me."

Hotels would have to have at least one employee or volunteer with up-to-date certifications from the American Red Cross, American Heart Association or other recognized training program on the use of AEDs on the premises when a public or private event is taking place.

Firefighters with cancer

Legislators are proposing the Firefighter Cancer Registry Act to create a voluntary system of tracking and studying firefighters who develop cancer related to their jobs.

The registry would collect relevant history and occupational information from firefighters that can then be linked to existing data collected by state cancer registries.

The bill, co-sponsored by Assemblyman John Armato, D-Atlantic, stipulates that information collected for the registry would include age and demographic information, status of volunteer or career firefighter, the number of years worked, the number of fire incidences a firefighter responded to, a firefighter's history of smoking or drug use, relevant medical history information, and any other information deemed important.

Health experts would then work to process the data and make it available for research and awareness purposes while maintaining the confidentiality of participating firefighters. Legislators hope the information can be used to identify ways to prevent cancer from occurring, sponsors said.

"These courageous men and women are not merely exposed to acute risks like fire," Assemblywoman Yvonne Lopez, D-Middlesex, said in a statement. "They are also exposed, at much higher rates, to known and suspected carcinogens . . . that are released from leaks or fires in electrical equipment, and dioxin, a dangerous byproduct of combustion."

Meningitis on college campuses

A bipartisan bill approved by the state Assembly Health and Senior Services committee Monday aims to decrease outbreaks of meningitis at New Jersey colleges and universities.

Students attending four-year private or public colleges and universities would be required to show proof of vaccination against the meningococcal disease or get the vaccination as a condition of living in residential housing. Students who do not live in campus dormitory housing are excluded from the requirement, the bill states.

Both public and private institutions would be required to offer the vaccines through their student health services programs or through an agreement with a community health provider.

Sponsors of the bill based the requirement off recommendations of the national Advisory Committee on Immunization of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The bill now awaits consideration in the full state Assembly.

Maintaining coverage for medications

Patients getting medications for chronic illnesses may find themselves in jeopardy if and when their insurance carrier decides not to cover the medication anymore. A bill that would ensure patients get uninterrupted coverage of those medications got approval by the state Assembly Financial Institutions and Insurance committee this week.

The bill would require insurers, as well as hospitals, medical corporations, health maintenance organizations and other parties to provide continued coverage of a prescription drug for a complex, chronic medical condition or rare disease when the drug had been previously covered by the insurance carrier and if the doctor or health provider continues to prescribe the drug.

Patients protected under the proposed law would include those with conditions that do not have a known cure or can be severely debilitating or fatal if left untreated, as well as patients with rare diseases that affect less than 200,000 people in the United States.

"Many times a health insurance carrier will stop providing coverage for a medication but still cover a generic, sometimes less effective form," Assemblywoman Valerie Vainieri Huttle, D-Bergen, said in a statement.

"Patients who suffer from daily symptoms of chronic illness should have a choice whether to continue the medication that works for them and not have to settle for a generic brand that may not work."