Resident Work Hours and Patient Safety
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Abstract

Postgraduate training of residents and interns is extremely demanding. Some programs require residents to work shifts greater than 36-48 hours straight with little or no sleep. Residents have reported work hours in excess of one hundred hours per week. Research has shown excessive work hours have been linked to costly and serious patient errors as well as the risk of accidents to post-call physicians driving home. Other industries that impact public safety, such as aviation and trucking, have well established work hour policies.

In 2001 the House passed the Patient and Physician Safety and Protection Act which would have mandated an 80-hour work week, allowed physicians in training to report violations anonymously with out fear of retribution, and provided a mechanism to monitor complaints concerning programs that violate the work restriction policy.1 The same week the Senate was to vote on the companion bill, the American Council of Graduate Medical Education (ACGME) and the American Osteopathic Association (AOA) established 80-hour work hour standards for interns and residents. However, two years later, the ability of the AAMC and AOA to effectively monitor and enforce work hour limits is under scrutiny.

Violations of the ACGME/AOA policies can result in significant monetary penalties.30 In hospitals with small training programs, policy citations can affect the bottom line. Nevertheless, all hospitals should adhere to the ACGME/AOA policies to ensure quality of care and the safety of patients, as well as quality of training and the personal well-being of resident physicians.