

Did You Know?

Decubitus Ulcers Exact Huge Toll in Terms of Human Suffering and Costly Treatment

Prevention of Decubitus Can Justify the Approval of Wheelchair Accessories and Other DME

Decubitus ulcers, better known as pressure sores or bed sores, are an injury to the skin and nearby tissue. They are caused by constant pressure that restricts the flow of blood to the area, eventually causing the death of the cell. Pressure sores range in severity from reddening of the skin (stage 1) to severe, deep craters that extend to muscle and bone (stage 4). Severe pressure sores are difficult and slow to heal, and serious complications can arise when pressure sores do not heal properly.

Individuals who spend most of their day in a wheelchair or bed are at increased risk of developing pressure sores. Other risk factors include: advanced age, an inability to reposition oneself; friction and shearing (i.e., uncontrolled movements that cause rubbing against sheets); loss of feeling in certain parts of the body; decreased nutritional intake; presence of bony prominences; and excessive exposure to moisture (i.e., incontinence). Particularly vulnerable are residents of nursing homes, hospital patients, and quadriplegics.

Pressure sores are painful, debilitating, and potentially life threatening. It is estimated that about 60,000 people die each year from complications caused by pressure sores, and individuals with a history of pressure sores demonstrate an increased risk of further occurrences. Pressure sores are also financially costly in that they are expensive to treat. One source, [emedicine.com](http://www.emedicine.com) (www.emedicine.com/medscape.com/article/319284-overview), reported that average costs per patient for treatment of pressure sores range from \$4,000 to \$40,000, depending on severity of the wound. Another source, Medline Industries, citing CMS, reported that the average cost for a pressure sore as secondary diagnosis is \$43,180 (www.medline.com/media-room/press-release.asp?ID=96). The total cost of treatment in the United States is estimated between \$1 billion and \$11 billion depending on the reported source. Even at the lowest estimate of \$1 billion, pressure sores are costing the health care system a significant amount of money.

The National Pressure Ulcer Advisory Panel (NPUAP) is an independent not-for-profit professional organization committed to the prevention and management of pressure sores. Its board of directors is comprised of leading experts from different health care disciplines. According to NPUAP, many pressure sores are preventable. Medline reported that in 2007, more than 257,412 preventable pressure sores were reported as secondary diagnoses in hospitals. As reported

in 2009, Northwest Hospital made pressure sore prevention a priority and over a 6-month period, employed numerous interventions to successfully reduce the occurrence of pressure sores.

The cost savings of preventing pressure sores is significant. Some state Medicaid regulations or policy clearly acknowledge prevention as a goal of Medicaid. The prevention of pressure sores, where possible, should be the treatment of choice.

Since there are a number of risk factors for pressure sores ranging from nutrition to incontinence, interventions must include a full range of medical services. In some cases, prevention may require specialized equipment. A properly fitted wheelchair or seating system; a special pressure reducing surface on mattresses; wheelchair accessories such as tilt, recline, or stander (see our separate Did You Know publication, *State Medicaid Agencies Can Fund Standing Wheelchairs*, available at www.nls.org/did%20you%20know/Passive%20standing%20wheelchairs.pdf); a standing frame; or items that promote hygiene (bathing equipment or commodes), may be medically necessary to prevent the occurrence or recurrence of pressure sores.

When medical services that could prevent pressure sores are delayed or denied, the particular funding program, such as Medicaid, will likely experience increased costs due to the expensive nature of pressure sore treatment. As the gentleman in the long-ago TV ad proclaimed, in regards to a new oil filter, *you can pay me now, or you can pay me later.*+ The cost of prevention will be negligible compared to the cost of treatment of a severe pressure sore.

Please feel free to contact us if you have any questions or comments. Also, if you won a hearing or court appeal/lawsuit in which pressure sore prevention was an issue, please send us copies of the hearing decisions or court decisions/documents, so that we can share them with the AT network.

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