

Pa. safety agency says losing autonomy jeopardizes patients

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By Carolyn Beeler

An independent agency in Pennsylvania that collects and compiles data on hospital errors says its ability to protect patients will be compromised if it is rolled into the state Department of Health.

The Pennsylvania Patient Safety Authority collects some of the same data as the Department of Health on medical errors that injure patients. But it also takes reports on near-misses, and more minor errors, such as medication mix-ups, that do not cause patient harm.

It received an average of more than 600 reports a day in 2010. But that number would drop under the new structure, says Bill Marella of the safety authority.

"Hospitals, I think, would be reluctant to share that kind of information with their regulator because they'd be afraid that it would be used for enforcement purposes," Marella said.

The Department of Health's Christine Cronkright said officials are taking concerns about agency independence into account in planning the merger.

The new plan will reduce redundancies, Cronkright said, and allow the agencies to better study data they both collect, such as reports on hospital-acquired infections.

"For the benefit of the public's health and safety, we can look at that data together and develop a more comprehensive approach to looking at that particular issue," Cronkright said.

The independent agency was created by legislative action in 2002 and is funded by a fee levied on hospitals.

Bill Munier, a federal official who works with patient safety organizations around the country, says the Pennsylvania Patient Safety Authority is considered a leader nationally.

"Well over half the states have statewide-reporting systems. I'm not aware of any that get anywhere approaching the volume of reports that come in to Pennsylvania," Munier said. "And of course, that's what you want, you want people that feel safe reporting to an authority when something goes wrong or almost goes wrong."

Legislators will take up the issue in their budget hearings in the coming months.