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EDITORIAL

Greenlick leads way for better oversight

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Patients of health professionals in Oregon will receive better protection, and nurses with drug and alcohol addictions still will get appropriate treatment under a new law approved by the Oregon Legislature thanks to the leadership of Beaverton-area state Rep. Mitch Greenlick.

The bill, one of four actions in the 2009 legislative session related to health-licensing boards, addresses a major problem identified during a 2006-07 Portland Tribune investigation of nursing regulation in Oregon. During that investigation, the Tribune uncovered numerous instances of lax oversight of nurses who mistreated or neglected patients. One particularly troubling finding was that nurses being treated for drug addiction were allowed to continue practicing, despite repeated relapses and even abuse of patients.

Those repeat offenders ought to have been removed from their jobs until they had proven themselves trustworthy. But the Oregon State Board of Nursing, which licenses the state's 65,000 nurses, also happens to be the agency responsible for running a confidential program that oversees addicted nurses while they remain at work. What that has meant in practice is that nurses could enter the monitoring program, keep their licenses and in some cases – because of confidentiality rules – even avoid prosecution for crimes.

The Legislature is correcting this systemic conflict of interest with House Bill 2345, which abolishes the confidential programs not only for nurses, but also for physicians, dentists and pharmacists. In place of these programs that up until now have been run by the professionals themselves, the state in the future will either establish treatment and monitoring programs, or it will contract with a non-profit organization for that purpose.

Although we prefer the nonprofit model for its greater independence, we support any change that will keep closer tabs on health professionals who are struggling with drug and alcohol habits. We also welcome three other legislative reforms:

- House Bill 2059, which requires all health professionals in Oregon to report any unprofessional conduct they witness among their colleagues to the appropriate licensing board.
- House Bill 2058, which gives the governor power to dismiss the members of any health-licensing board without having to show cause.
- And House Bill 2119, which provides the governor greater oversight of health-licensing boards, including the ability to fire executive directors without cause.

The need for these new laws was well illustrated by the series of Tribune news stories that revealed multiple cases where the state Board of Nursing had utterly failed in its duty to oversee the nursing profession. The Tribune's investigation eventually led to the departure of the nursing board's two top administrators.

During the long-running controversy, however, Gov. Ted Kulongoski was slow to dismiss and replace the nursing board itself. He claimed he couldn't send board members packing without showing cause. With the latest legislation, the governor will have the power to act immediately to make changes in healthcare oversight boards.

In pushing these reforms forward, we are particularly pleased with the leadership shown by Greenlick, who promised and delivered on legislative action. The efforts of Greenlick and other legislators will help not just patients but also the vast majority of dedicated nurses in Oregon who don't want their profession tarnished by a small number of wayward peers.