

# The Star-Ledger

## Consumer groups seek data on Jersey hospitals' errors

**AARP, Consumers Union want info to be disclosed to the public**

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BY SUSAN K. LIVIO

**Star-Ledger Staff**

Arguing that consumers have access to more information about buying a car than choosing a hospital, two high-profile consumer organizations yesterday urged lawmakers to identify which hospitals are making life-threatening mistakes.

AARP and Consumers Union, publisher of Consumer Reports, launched a campaign to strengthen a law enacted four years ago that requires hospitals to tell the state health department about preventable medical mistakes they've made, but does not require the identities of the hospitals to be disclosed to the public.

They said they will lobby for passage this fall of a bill that would disclose how many life-threatening, preventable mistakes -- such as patients falling or receiving the wrong medication or blood type -- took place at each hospital in the state.

Hospitals reported 450 serious mistakes contributing to the deaths of 42 patients in 2006, according to the most recent data compiled by the Department of Health and Senior Services.

Marilyn Askin, AARP's chief legislative advocate, said she's been shopping around for a hospital to perform hip surgery. "One important piece of the equation is the record of any hospital on preventing medical errors. Currently this information is impossible to find," she said. "When buying a car, consumers can easily access information about that car's safety record."

When legislators drafted the legislation, known as the Patient Safety Act, they granted the health facilities anonymity to encourage hospital executives to report the errors and work with the health department to prevent future mistakes, said one of the bill's sponsors, Sen. Joseph Vitale (D-Middlesex). "It's an aggressive but non-punitive way of eliminating errors," he said.

Vitale, the chairman of the Senate Health, Human Services and Senior Citizens Committee, said he would "consider ways to strengthen" the law. "But I want to make sure what we report does not have a chilling effect."

The New Jersey Hospital Association would resist any bill that would create a "blame and

shame environment," its spokeswoman, Kerry McKean Kelly, said.

But hospital executives are willing to consider another goal sought by Consumers Union and AARP: preventing hospitals from charging patients for the medical care required by life-threatening mistakes.

"Our trustees are working on a policy to do just that," Kelly said.

AARP officials praised Gov. Jon Corzine and the Legislature for adopting a budget in June that contains language which for the first time prevents the state Medicaid office from paying for treatment associated with major preventable medical errors.

The policy change is estimated to save \$1 million each in state and federal funds, Human Services spokeswoman Nicole Brossoie said.

"Not only does the state budget need to be protected, but consumers need to be protected," Douglas Johnston, AARP-NJ's advocacy manager, said.