

June 17, 2004

Ms. Glenda E. Hood
Secretary of State
R.A. Gray Building
500 South Bronough Street
Tallahassee, FL 32399

Dear Secretary Hood:

I hereby transmit to you, with my signature, Committee Substitute for Senate Bill 626, entitled:

An act relating to anesthesiologist assistants . . .

This bill provides for the licensure of anesthesiologist assistants (AA) and the regulation of these health care professionals by the boards of medicine and osteopathic medicine. The bill also requires anesthesiologists who supervise AAs to file written protocols with the board and limits to two the number of AAs who may be supervised by one anesthesiologist. After July 1, 2008, the boards may increase the number to 8 by rule. The boards are granted rulemaking authority for implementation of the bill requirements.

This bill has been the subject of a vigorous debate for several years. Since passage of the bill, many people have communicated their deeply held convictions on this issue. I have carefully considered their comments.

I believe that government's authority to restrain people's ability to engage in various health occupations should be limited to those instances where public safety is clearly at stake. In health care, the workforce is increasingly specialized; government sanctions are frequently sought and used to establish professional distinctions and erect barriers to competition. In every instance, the blanket of patient safety provides cover for anti-competitive motivations.

Nurses have found themselves in the middle of several such contests and have experienced both wins and losses. The practice of nurse midwifery and the practice of nurse anesthetists offer just two examples. In each case, authority to practice was resisted by the medical profession ostensibly based on insufficient training, limited competencies, and risk to the patients. In both cases, nurses succeeded in broadening their scope of practice. Quality of care endures. Access to care improves.

Despite the strong opposition to SB 626 from the nursing profession, I believe that authorization for anesthesiologist assistants will yield similar positive results. I am satisfied there is adequate protection against incompetent providers through the

supervision of anesthesiologists and the oversight of the Board of Medicine and Board of Osteopathic Medicine. I recognize the differences in training between nurse anesthetists and AAs, but the difference does not equate to inferiority. AAs in Florida will be required to graduate from an accredited program and satisfactorily complete a national proficiency exam. The AA curriculum includes intense training in anesthesia and substantial clinical experience.

Although many express concern over the supervisory provision, I am convinced that the written protocols and the close proximity of the anesthesiologist will provide the necessary protections. Ultimately, the anesthesiologist is responsible for the performance of the AA—a condition that generates considerable incentive for personal attention and careful supervision. Numerous other safeguards, such as credentialing of individual practitioners, accreditation of facilities, and continuous quality improvement programs, offer additional layers of protection for patients.

With these assurances, I believe that anesthesiologist assistants can practice safely and should be permitted to practice in Florida. I also believe that other instances of overly restrictive regulation of health professions, such as the limitations on nurses' ability to prescribe certain medications, should be decided in favor of a broader scope of practice. Therefore, I will look forward to working with the Florida Nurses Association and other nursing organizations that seek legislation to expand the ability of qualified nurses to write prescriptions.

My support for SB 626 is premised on the same grounds as the nurses' proposal for broader prescribing authority. With sufficient attention to patient safety, limitations on the scope of practice by health professionals can and should be lifted. For this reason, and as noted above, I hereby sign Committee Substitute for Senate Bill 626.

Sincerely,

Jeb Bush