**State Capitol Week in Review**

March 19, 2021

LITTLE ROCK – The Senate has approved legislation to grant to certified nurse practitioners full and independent practice authority.

The nurses would need about three years, or 6,240 hours, of practice under a collaborative agreement with a physician in order to earn the right to practice independently.

Nurses with fully independent practice authority will then have their licenses renewed every three years. They will be able to receive and prescribe drugs, medications and therapeutic devices.

Scope of practice bills tend to be controversial and difficult to pass. However, months of negotiations went into the writing of the legislation, House Bill 1258. It passed the Senate and House with clear majorities and was sent to the governor.

The Senate passed another scope of practice bill, but by the bare minimum. HB 1198 changes the definition of “certified registered nurse anesthesia.” Those nurses would no longer practice “under the supervision” of a physician. Instead, under HB 1198 they would work “in consultation with” a physician.”

Supporters of HB 1198 say it will help hospitals in rural areas that have trouble recruiting surgeons willing to supervise and be responsible for the work of nurse anesthetists.

The Senate passed the bill by a vote of 18-to-12. In the 35-member Senate, 18 is the minimum number of votes needed to pass a bill.

HB 1198 failed in the House on the first attempt, getting only 50 affirmative votes and needing at least 51. On a second try, it received 55 votes. It was sent to the governor.

Pharmacists and their technicians will be authorized to give vaccinations and immunizations, because of the passage of HB 1134 and HB 1135. Both bills have completed the legislative process and were sent to the governor.

Pharmacists will be able to dispense birth control pills without a prescription because of the passage of HB 1069, which the legislature has passed and sent to the governor. The pharmacist must notify the woman’s primary care physician of the pills being dispensed.

Also, the pharmacist must ask the woman when her most recent doctor visit took place. If it is more than six months since the most recent visit, the pharmacist shall refer her to a primary care physician or to a women’s health care provider. Also, the pharmacist could not dispense more than six months of birth control pills until the woman sees a doctor.

Only women aged 18 and older may get birth control from a pharmacist without a prescription.

Both chambers have passed a version of Senate Bill 289, which protects physicians and medical providers from punishment if they refuse to perform a procedure because it would go against their conscience.

For example, a hospital could not deny their staffing privileges, demote or terminate them. Nor would the physician be made liable in a civil suit.

However, the physician would not have the right to deny someone emergency care.

The Senate passed and sent to the House SB 309 to lower the age for colorectal cancer screenings that are covered by health insurance, from 50 to 45. Follow-up colonoscopies, if needed, would also be covered for people 45 and over.