

7 critical questions you should ask . . .

If you or a family member is about to enter the hospital, take the time to ask these questions about nurse staffing.

- 1 What percentage of nursing staff are registered nurses?
- 2 Will a registered nurse care for me directly?
- 3 How many times will I be seen by an RN each day?
- 4 What other types of workers will be assigned to me and what tasks will they perform?
- 5 How often are nurses forced to work overtime?
- 6 Will a registered nurse be available to teach me about treatments and what to do when I go home?
- 7 Is the hospital using temporary nurses to fill gaps in staffing? Have they been properly trained and oriented?

If you believe you have received improper or unsafe care at a facility in New York state, contact the New York State Health Department Field Office in your area. The number is listed in the blue pages of your phone book under "State Health Department."

For more information about nurses' efforts to improve staffing in healthcare facilities, call the New York State Nurses Association:

800-724-NYRN, Ext. 282

NYSNA
NEW YORK STATE NURSES ASSOCIATION

New York State Nurses Association
11 Cornell Road
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Safe Nurse Staffing

How does it
affect you
and your
family?

Information from the
New York State Nurses Association

What is safe staffing?

Safe nurse staffing is when there are enough nurses on duty in hospitals and nursing homes to provide the care patients need to get well.

The number of nurses needed depends on many factors: the patient's condition, the experience and competency of the staff, whether it is day or night shift, and even the physical layout of the facility.

Most people assume that when they or their loved ones go into a hospital or nursing home, there will be enough nurses on staff to provide safe, quality care. Unfortunately, that is not always the case.

Unsafe staffing puts patients at risk

Why is staffing important? Patients get well faster and have fewer complications when they receive more nursing care.

When patients are not seen often enough by RNs, the telltale symptoms of complications or infection are not caught early and important preventive care is short-changed.

Studies show that hospital patients are more likely to suffer from complications such as urinary tract infections, upper gastrointestinal bleeding, pneumonia, and shock or cardiac arrest when they receive fewer hours of RN care.¹

Even more alarming, RN staffing levels are closely tied to mortality rates. Each additional patient per RN increases a patient's chance of dying in the hospital by 7%. Patients on surgical units with patient-to-RN ratios of 8:1 were 31% more likely to die within 30 days than those on surgical units with ratios of 4:1.²

When nurses are forced to care for too many patients, they become rushed and overtired. Increased workloads are a critical factor in a higher rate of medical errors.³



Unsafe staffing drives nurses away from nursing

Maybe you've heard that the nursing shortage is causing understaffing. The shortage actually started in the mid-1990s when hospitals cut nursing staff and began using more unlicensed workers to care for patients.

Since then, "short staffing" and forced overtime have driven even more nurses away from bedside care. Between 1999 and 2002, 20% of RNs working in hospitals in New York state left nursing, with nearly one third citing job stress as the reason. The State Education Department says that at least 12% of the RN hospital work force will continue to be lost each year due to stress-related burnout.⁴

Nurses who have left nursing say improvements in working hours and working conditions would cause them to reconsider.⁵ That's the best way to end the nursing shortage!

¹ *New England Journal of Medicine* (May 2002).

² *Journal of the American Medical Association* (November 2002)

³ Summary of 1999 Information Submitted to MedMARx: A National Database for Hospital Error Reporting (2000).

⁴ 2000 Survey of New York State Registered Nurses, New York State Education Department (2003)

⁵ *The Nurse Shortage: Perspectives From Current Direct Care Nurses and Former Direct Care Nurses*, Peter D. Hart Research Associates, (2001).

What can be done about unsafe staffing?

State regulations currently require hospitals and nursing homes to have adequate nursing staff, but do not define what that is. Each facility decides for itself whether it has enough nurses on staff.

Nurses believe that statewide staffing guidelines will help ensure quality nursing care. They support state legislation that would require the State Department of Health to set consistent, enforceable staffing guidelines in all types of healthcare settings, including hospitals, nursing homes, home care, clinics, and schools.

Nurses also support legislation that would make it illegal for hospitals to force nurses to work beyond their regularly scheduled shifts in a non-emergency. Nurses should have the right to refuse overtime if they believe they are too tired to provide safe nursing care.

The public agrees. In a 2003 poll, 82% of New York state residents said the state should set standards for healthcare staffing.

You can help!

If you agree that safe staffing is crucial to patient care, contact your state senator and assemblymember (see the blue pages of your phone book). Tell them to support legislation to ensure safe staffing and end forced overtime for nurses.

For more information on these issues, please visit our Web site at www.nysna.org and click on "Governmental Relations."