

## Minimums for nurses necessary

By Deborah Burger

**Monday, December 01, 2003** - FOR the first time in years, California patients and their families have a reason to look beyond the doom-and-gloom stories that have dominated reports about the decline in the quality of hospital care and a seemingly intractable nursing shortage.

As of Jan. 1, all hospitals will be required to maintain safe staffing levels — minimum ratios of registered nurses to patients — as a result of a law sponsored by the California Nurses Association, and the advent of the ratios is helping spur significant growth in the state's RN work force.

In recent weeks, some in the hospital industry, who have never liked the new law, have fanned fears of closures or ambulance diversions by hospitals unwilling to comply with the law by claiming a lack of available nurses. It's their hope that public alarm will encourage Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger to delay or weaken the ratios.

Any such moves would be shortsighted, could abort the progress California has made in tackling the nursing shortage and put patients at risk.

Recent data show the landscape for nurses has changed in California. Since the Safe Staffing Law was signed in 1999, there has been a dramatic influx of RNs into the state. Coupled with the 5,100 new RNs graduated every year by state nursing schools, the number of active RNs is growing by 10,000 a year.

And the numbers will rise even more in the next few years due to increased millions the Davis administration allocated for expanded capacity in our nursing education programs, as well as initiatives to train other health-care workers to become RNs and promote retention.

Overall, California today has more than 30,000 more actively licensed RNs than the Board of Registered Nursing, which licenses RNs, predicted the state would have at this date — six times the number the state health department estimated would be needed for the ratios.

Much of the growth can be directly tied to RNs' anticipation of safer conditions for patients and nurses in hospitals, along with significant improvements in retirement security, compensation and working conditions for tens of thousands won by RNs in CNA-represented hospitals.

The experience of hospitals in Victoria, Australia, where ratios were implemented in 2001, emphasizes the point. Victoria hospitals are able to staff with the ratios — while other Australian states battle their own nursing shortage — and demand for nursing courses is up 26.5 percent.

Hospitals that continue to challenge the law and look for excuses to defy it are planning a risky game with their patients' safety — as numerous research by the nation's pre-eminent scientific and medical institutions and publications now attests.

In early November, for example, the Institute of Medicine of the National Academy of Sciences — the same organization that two years ago reported that 98,000 patients die every year due to preventable hospital errors — reported that insufficient monitoring of patients, caused by poor working conditions and the assignment of too few RNs, increases the likelihood of patient deaths and injuries.

The IOM study cited ample evidence that “makes clear that patient safety continues to be threatened; latent conditions in work environments are the primary sources of those threats” and “the work environment of nurses must be addressed if patient safety is to be improved.”

Similarly, studies in the Journal of the American Medical Association have found that nurses intercept 86 percent of all medication errors made by physicians, pharmacists and others, and that for each additional patient assigned to an RN, the likelihood of death within 30 days increases by 7 percent. A New England Journal of Medicine study documented that improved RN-to-patient ratios reduce rates of pneumonia, urinary infections, shock, cardiac arrest, gastrointestinal bleeding

and other adverse outcomes.

As the IOM put it, the research affirms “what physicians, patients, other health care providers and nurses themselves have long known: how well we are cared for by nurses affects our health, and sometimes can be a matter of life or death.”

Patient safety, of course, is precisely the reason California enacted the Safe Staffing Law. Recalcitrant hospital officials should abandon any plans to circumvent a needed law and join with RNs and patients in welcoming a new day.

*Deborah Burger is the president of the 55,000-member California Nurses Association.*