

Nurses care for staffing proposal; Too many patients hurts, survey says

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Nearly one in three Bay State nurses say they have had a patient die because they had too many to care for, according to a survey released yesterday. Understaffing has also contributes to medication errors, complications and longer stays, according to the report from the Massachusetts Nurses Association.

"People have actually died in Massachusetts because of this situation," said Julie Pinkham, the association's executive director. "That has a shock factor."

Armed with the new survey, hundreds of nurses rallied on Beacon Hill yesterday and in support of a proposal that would mandate nurse-to-patient ratios. Many also spoke at a public hearing in favor of the plan.

Under the safe-staffing proposal, hospitals could assign no more than four patients to a nurse.

Opponents say the proposal would create an undue burden on hospitals, driving up costs and reducing patient access.

But those in favor urge that it would protect patients and bring nurses back into practices, they said.

High patient ratios are contributing to the **nursing shortage** as burned-out nurses leave, say nurses.

According to the survey, 65 percent who aren't working at the bedside would consider returning if the safe-staffing legislation passes.

"My biggest fear is how many more nurses we are going to lose if we don't do this," said Karen Higgins, the MNA's president. "We need to get this done or more nurses are going to walk."

Kerrie Studley, a psychiatric nurse at Pembroke Hospital, said she nearly quit in the middle of a shift because there weren't enough nurses on staff.

"It's basically a big concern with patient safety," she said. "We have suicidal patients and you may have two or three going off at the same time."

The psychiatric patients know when the hospital is short-staffed, she said.

"They tend to act up more, which makes it dangerous," Studley said.

Psychiatric patients are more likely to hurt themselves when there aren't enough nurses to tend to them, said Mary Marengo, a psychiatric nurse at St. Vincent's Hospital in Worcester.

"It's very frustrating," she said. "They have patients who are very volatile and very fragile."

The survey was the first in nine years to examine Bay State nurses' views on the quality of patient care. It was conducted by Opinion Dynamics, an independent research firm in Cambridge. Only 30 percent of those surveyed belong to the MNA.

Ninety-three percent reported being burned out by excessive patient loads. Nurses said their managers schedule too few nurses for their shifts and force nurses to work overtime.

The result, the nurses said, is that they don't have enough time to spend with patients.

Nearly 90 percent say they don't have enough time to comfort and assist patients and their families. They also say that patients have to wait for their medications and treatments.

"A medication delay can result not only in unnecessary pain and suffering, but it can lead to a downturn in a patient's condition that causes harm or lengthens a patient's stay," Pinkham said.

But hospital managers oppose the safe-staffing legislation, saying it takes away their flexibility and would add to the cost of health care.

"We agree that patients need to have enough nurses," said Sharon Gale, president of the Massachusetts Organization of Nurse Executives. "Our point is that an arbitrary number can't account for all the variables that go into a staffing decision."

The number of patients that a nurse can safely handle depends on the illness of the patient, the skill of the nurse, the

support system within the hospital and the type of hospital, she said.

If hospitals are forced to have too many nurses on a given shift, costs will go up and they might have to close beds or turn away patients, she said.

"It would have the impact of decreasing patient access," Gale said.

Hospitals should be held accountable for setting the ratios that are right for themselves, she said.

"That varies from an urban teaching hospital to a small community hospital," Gale said.