

<http://www.mcall.com/news/opinion/anotherview/all-quote-c-a-anov13,0,6781602.story?coll=all-newsopinionanotherview-hed>

From The Morning Call

Nurses need protection from forced overtime shifts

November 13, 2003

According to a new report issued by the Institute of Medicine of the National Academies last week, there are two life-saving questions you should ask when you are admitted to the hospital:

”How many patients is my nurse caring for?” and, “How many hours has my nurse been working today?”

The report, commissioned by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, concluded that hospitals and nursing homes are endangering patients by requiring nurses to work mandated overtime, and that having sufficient nurse staffing was the single best defense against medical errors.

Working long hours, the study concludes, causes fatigue, burnout, reduces productivity and greatly increases the risk that a nurse will make a mistake that will harm a patient. According to Donald Steinwachs, chairman of the health policy department at Johns Hopkins University and chairman of the panel of 18 experts who conducted the study, nurse fatigue was a “major cause of mistakes and errors.” The report also concluded, “Long work hours pose one of the most serious threats to patient safety, because fatigue slows reaction time, decreases energy, diminishes attention to detail, and otherwise contributes to errors.”

The report notes that public safety regulations exist regulating the work hours of truck drivers, pilots and flight attendants. To reduce “error-producing fatigue,” the report said, state officials should step in to regulate the number of hours nurses can be required to work in one day. Thankfully, such an effort is under way here in Pennsylvania. House Bill 1400 and Senate Bill 722 would ban the dangerous practice of forcing already exhausted nurses to work unwanted mandatory overtime.

Preventing deaths and injuries by eliminating forced overtime will also contribute to decreasing the number of malpractice lawsuits thereby reducing the cost of malpractice insurance. While not a silver bullet, banning forced overtime successfully attacks two very serious problems confronting the commonwealth: the chronic shortage of nurses willing to work in hospitals and the flight of physicians to regions with cheaper malpractice insurance rates.

The Institute of Medicine is a branch of the National Academy of Sciences, an independent and nonpartisan body established to study complex problems. The institute report also concludes that your best defense against becoming a victim of a preventable medical error is to be admitted to a hospital with sufficient nurse staffing.

The academy found overwhelming evidence that as levels of nurse staffing rose the quality of care improved, because nurses had more time to monitor patients and can more readily detect changes in their conditions. “Studies show that increased infections, bleeding and cardiac and respiratory failure are associated with inadequate numbers of nurses,” the report said. “Nurses defend against medical errors. For example, a study in two hospitals found that nurses intercepted 86 percent of medical errors before they reached patients.”

The academy’s conclusions on the link between nurse staffing and preventable patient death and injury mirror those of several important studies in the last year, including those by respected researchers at Harvard University and the University of Pennsylvania. The University of Pennsylvania study found that when a medical-surgical nurse was required to care for eight patients instead of four, those patients stood a 31 percent greater chance of dying in the hospital.

How many more patients will have to die unnecessarily before our hospitals and the state Legislature intervene to save patients' lives? How many more medical errors will have to occur before the Legislature will follow the lead of the eight other states that have already banned mandatory overtime? The time for these life-saving changes is now.

Bill Cruice is executive director of PASNAP, the Pennsylvania Association of Staff Nurses and Allied Professionals, which is based in Conshohocken.