

January 3, 2004, Saturday

California requiring more nurses in acute care hospitals
By Barbara Feder Ostrov

SAN JOSE, Calif. _ Patients in California hospitals now may find a nurse by their side almost as soon as they press the call button, thanks to first-in-the-nation rules requiring more nurses in acute care hospitals.

After years of caring for as many as 12 patients at one time, many state nurses are ecstatic about the requirements, which took effect New Year's Day and promise to cut their patient loads by half or more.

"If you have too many patients, you just put out fires. At the end of the day, you're not only physically burned out, but emotionally burned out," said Sally O'Brien, a nurse at Sequoia Hospital in Redwood City. "Now I feel like it's finally the profession we can be proud of."

California hospitals must have one nurse on duty for every six patients in their medical-surgical wards; one nurse to four patients in emergency rooms; and one nurse to two patients in labor and delivery wards. Other minimum staffing standards apply to other hospital wards, but nurses may not care for more than eight patients at a time.

That's welcome news for Sasan Shams, whose 83-year-old father, Hasan, is recovering from spine surgery at O'Connor Hospital in San Jose.

Shams rotates with family members to be at his father's bedside daily. He said he has seen the hospital's nurses caring for as many as nine patients each, both on day and evening shifts during the two months his father has been in the hospital.

"I noticed that they were really under stress," Shams, a San Jose restaurant owner, said this week. "They're doing the best they can, but with less patients they could do better. These are life and death matters."

Most California hospitals opposed the new rules, which were a victory for the California Nurses Association, a powerful, 55,000-nurse union that had long lobbied for them. Since they were approved, hospitals have hired thousands of nurses to comply, offering recruits everything from \$7,500 bonuses to lavish health benefits to cheap housing.

But despite those efforts, hospital officials are warning they may be forced to close beds, cancel elective surgeries or shut down entire units because of a nationwide nursing shortage that's particularly acute in California.

”There simply aren’t enough nurses,” said Jan Emerson, a spokeswoman for the California Healthcare Association, a hospital industry group. “It’s going to be a difficult dilemma for hospitals. If they have to turn patients away, that goes against everything they’re set up to do.”

For now, the warnings remain just that: No hospital has actually cut back on patient services because of the new guidelines, Emerson said. Nor have hospitals requested to be exempted from the new requirements, state health officials said.

The new rules, finalized earlier this year, stem from a 1999 law requiring California’s acute care hospitals to observe strict nurse-to-patient ratios in all wards. Previously, the state had only required minimum numbers of nurses for specialized units such as intensive care. In other units, hospitals were allowed to deploy nurses based on the number of patients and the severity of their illnesses.

Although some hospitals appear to have delayed hiring enough nurses, hoping the mandates would be eased or revoked, others have hired many of the caregivers they need to comply with the new mandates, said Jill Furillo, director of national affairs for the California Nurses Association. But they have had to scramble to do it, recruiting recent grads, temporary registry nurses and nurses from as far away as Canada and the Philippines.

Furillo noted that a number of studies have linked inadequate nurse staffing in hospitals to patient injuries and deaths. But hospitals have generally opposed the ratios, citing concerns about inflexibility and cost. They initially proposed a minimum of one nurse to 10 patients on medical-surgical wards, which house a majority of in-patients.

Managed care giant Kaiser Permanente, which operates 27 acute care hospitals in California, has hired about 3,000 nurses since 2001 and is close to meeting its own, more generous standard of one nurse to four patients in medical-surgical units, said Anita Zuniga, executive director for patient care services in Northern California.

At San Jose Medical Center and Regional Medical Center of San Jose, recruiters offered up starting salaries of \$70,000 for newly graduated nurses. The packages include tuition reimbursement and fully paid health benefits for nurses and their families, among other incentives, said spokeswoman Leslie Kelsay.

San Jose Medical Center imported about 20 nurses from Canada, including 23-year-old Loa Page from the rural town of Salmon Arm in British Columbia. Working 12-hour shifts on the hospital’s medical-surgical unit, Page typically cares for patients recovering from surgery, car accidents or assaults.

”It’s definitely a good idea,” Page said of the new standards, noting that nurses traditionally have been pressured to take on additional patients. “You feel better about the care you are giving.”

Alta Bates-Summit Medical Center, which has hospital campuses in Oakland and Berkeley, recruited about 50 nurses from the Philippines and offered to pay off loans of recent nursing school graduates, said Viki Ardito, chief nursing officer. Like many hospital networks, Alta Bates-Summit plans to rely on temporary registry nurses to help fill in the gaps. Ardito said she has had a particularly tough time filling specialized posts in emergency rooms and psychiatric wards.

"We're a huge facility," Ardito said.

Unionized nurses around the state say they'll be closely monitoring hospitals' track record in coming months. Patients and their families will be watching, too, to see if their hospital care improves.

"I wish we didn't have to legislate this kind of thing," said Jeanne Mankinen, a Mountain View woman who was hospitalized for breast cancer surgery in August.

"I wish that the health care industry was making decisions on something other than profit. Since that doesn't seem to be the case, I guess we're left with no choice. You can't provide same level of care if you're stretched too thin."

—

(c) 2004, San Jose Mercury News (San Jose, Calif.).

Visit [MercuryNews.com](http://www.mercurynews.com), the World Wide Web site of the Mercury News, at <http://www.mercurynews.com>.