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Nursing a Grudge

The Governor's decision to allow bigger hospital work loads has ignited a bitter battle in California
By MARGOT ROOSEVELT/LOS ANGELES

Perhaps someone should have warned Arnold Schwarzenegger that nurses are are no pushovers. For weeks, California's famously tough Governor has been locked in a furious feud with the state's R.N.s over his decision to suspend new state rules that would limit the number of patients a nurse must care for. The tiff took off at a statewide women's conference in Long Beach last December, when the Governor ridiculed a group of nurses who were there to protest. To be sure, the R.N.s were provocative, unfurling a banner that read HANDS OFF OUR RATIOS—a not-so-subtle reference to allegations of female groping by Schwarzenegger that had dogged his gubernatorial campaign. But his response set a combative tone. “Pay no attention,” the Governor told the 10,000 women in attendance. “They are the special interests ... I am always kicking their butts.”

The nurses took that as an invitation to keep Schwarzenegger's derriere pinned to the hot seat. As they see it, the Governor is just bowing to another set of special interests—hospital and insurance companies—that want to keep profits up by employing fewer nurses than California law requires. And so the nurses have produced a Hollywood caper of a showdown, putting unrelenting public pressure on Schwarzenegger to back down. In two protests, thousands of uniformed R.N.s stormed the steps of the capitol in Sacramento, shouting, “Arnold, Arnold, you can't hide—we can see your corporate side!” Nurses have buzzed his fund raisers with “Air Arnold” planes that drag banners reading DON'T BE BIG BUSINESS'S BULLY! They picketed a celebrity-studded party the Governor threw at his Brentwood home for retired NBC anchor Tom Brokaw. When the A&E channel ran a biopic called See Arnold Run, the California Nurses Association punctuated it with commercials of R.N.s denouncing him as “driven by greed and profits,” part of a \$100,000 TV campaign. Their full-page ads in Washington and California newspapers accused him of kowtowing to the hospital lobby to “put vital health policy up for sale.” The headline: KICKING BUTT OR KISSING UP? Wherever Schwarzenegger turns up these days, nurses are sure to follow.

The nurses, retorted Schwarzenegger, “can't tear me down, because I am with the people.” But he may not be able to make his get-tough position stick. The Sacramento Superior Court will hear arguments this week on the ratio issue in a lawsuit brought by the nurses' association. California's 1999 law, which took effect last year, is the first in the nation to mandate fixed nurse-to-patient ratios after takeovers of community hospitals by for-profit chains led to cutbacks. But two days after the November election, Schwarzenegger officials loosened nurse staffing requirements for emergency rooms and delayed until 2008 putting into effect a rule requiring a 1-to-5 nurse-to-patient ratio for medical-surgical units. “We don't have enough nurses—nor can the hospitals afford that,” the Governor said. “Our hospitals are already closing down.”

The R.N.s claim their campaign has contributed to a 10-point drop in Schwarzenegger's approval rating since September, although it still hovers at 55%. “They're spending a lot of money to vilify him,” says press secretary Margita Thompson, “but it doesn't faze him.” Yet when he attended a recent Sacramento film screening the very sight of a nurse in periwinkle-hued hospital scrubs unnerved his security guards, who pulled the ticketed customer out of her fifth-row seat and interrogated her for an hour before releasing her. “They treated me like I was a terrorist,” says Kelly Di Giacomo, a Sacramento cardiac nurse.

Whatever happens in court this week, Schwarzenegger's butt kicking has hardly improved his image. According to a recent Gallup poll, nurses are more popular than he is. "The nurses care about patient safety," says state senator Sheila Kuehl, author of the ratio law. "The Governor insulted them. It was a big misstep."