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Editorial:
Nurse-patient ratio good law

Time to enact it; not delay it

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger has angered California nurses by trying to impose a three-year delay on a law that requires one nurse per five hospital patients and by threatening to “kick their butts.”

A Sacramento Superior Court judge has ruled the Schwarzenegger administration’s delay in implementing the nurse-to-patient ratio is illegal and an appeal is expected. In addition, legislators are calling for hearings into why the Schwarzenegger administration is ignoring its law on ratios.

It is fair to say, the governor is now feeling his own boot.

Instead of seeking to appeal the nurse-to-patient law, it is past time to enact it.

It will save lives.

According to a 2002 study, reported in the Journal of the American Medical Association, adding one patient to a nurse’s workload can increase a patient’s risk of dying within 30 days by 7 percent. Increase that load from four to six patients, there is a 14 percent increased chance of patients dying. Give a nurse eight patients, and the risk is 31 percent greater.

There’s more. As many as 20,000 unnecessary deaths a year may be traced to high nursing-patient loads, according to the study.

Nurse-to-patient ratios grew out of a proven concern in the late 1990s that inadequate staffing levels endanger patients and put a strain on nurses — often prompting them to leave the profession, exacerbating the national shortage of nurses.

In response, then-Gov. Gray Davis in 1999 signed a law establishing nurse-patient ratios, with the first phase of the law taking effect the start of this year.

During the four-year grace period, some hospitals embraced the law and set about hiring new nurses; others resisted it. Some, it turns out, were even paid by the Schwarzenegger administration to meet the ratios and then did not implement them. Some California hospitals — which posted \$4 billion in profits last year— claim the ratios will lead to cuts in services and the closing of facilities.

If that happens, the law should be adjusted to allow for more flexibility. However, the law in itself will be an incentive for hospitals to adjust priorities and to make nursing a more attractive profession.

Gov. Schwarzenegger should work double time to help increase the number of nurses in the state. One way within his power to do that is to ensure nursing programs at public community colleges are adequately funded.