

# NURSE STAFFING

## HOW EFFECTIVE ARE NURSING STAFF MIX AND NURSE-TO-PATIENT RATIO MECHANISMS IN IMPROVING NURSES' WORKLOADS?

### Source

McGillis Hall, L., Pink, L., Lalonde, M., Tomblin Murphy, G., O'Brien-Pallas, L., Laschinger, H. et al. (2006). Decision Making for Nurse Staffing: Canadian Perspectives. *Policy, Politics and Nursing Practice*. 7(4), 261-269.

### Objective

To evaluate and provide recommendations on mechanisms that measure nursing staff mix and nurse-to-patient ratios.

### Background

By 1999, provincial ministries of health began to see the nursing shortage as a serious issue. Their efforts to identify strategies to strengthen health human resources planning in Canada uncovered the need for improved data and research on the nursing sector. While some studies have examined the use of nursing staff mix models, little is known about their effectiveness.

### Methods

This study was conducted in three phases over six months.

- A literature review of mechanisms to measure nursing staff mix and nurse-to-patient ratios was completed. These mechanisms included workload measurement systems, management information systems and selected national frameworks for nurse staffing.
- Interviews were conducted with 22 key informants from across the country to explore the effectiveness of these mechanisms and assess how they affect nurses' workloads.
- The researchers analyzed barriers and facilitators to identifying appropriate nurse staffing as a cost-effective patient safety strategy.

## Principal Findings

- Using nursing staff mix frameworks is an important first step for organizations to plan nurse staffing decisions in the broader context of the health-care system.
- The use of nursing workload measurement systems to guide decision-making for nurse staffing in Canada is a contentious issue. The data collected through this method often do not reflect true workload; staffing is often not adjusted accordingly; and the process takes too much time to complete.
- There is currently no evidence of the effectiveness of legislated nurse-to-patient ratios. Standardizing nurse-to-patient ratios would have both pros and cons. One potential negative effect is that nurses would be prevented from making independent decisions about nurse staffing. However, nurses would be protected from excessive workloads.
- While solid empirical evidence shows nursing staff mix has an impact on patient outcomes in acute care settings, this evidence has rarely been applied in practice settings.

## What do the Study Findings Mean?

- Appropriate nursing staff mix, as defined in this research, will improve outcomes for patients, systems and nurses.
- Nurses and other stakeholders need to collaborate on effective strategies to raise awareness about the wealth of evidence on nurse staffing so that appropriate staffing will be implemented. Policy-makers must be brought into the discussion under the broader context of health human resources planning.
- Nurse leaders in Canada must make a clear commitment to the measurement of nursing workload and clarify the parameters of data collection.
- The pros and cons of standardizing nurse-to-patient ratios must be further examined before introducing such standards in Canada.

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