



April 12, 2005

Memorandum

To: Massachusetts Nurses Association

Fr: Chris Anderson

Re: Survey of doctors concerning RN staffing and patient care

This memorandum summarizes the main findings of a recent telephone survey of 150 Massachusetts doctors conducted between the dates of February 24 and March 8, 2005. Respondents were randomly selected from a file of all licensed physicians in the state and then screened to insure that they care for patients in a hospital setting on a regular basis.

Overview

Physicians believe that patient safety is being compromised as a result of understaffing of RNs, echoing what we have heard from nurses and patients in recent surveys. Most doctors think nurse staffing levels are too low, and nearly three-quarters of physicians support passing legislation to establish flexible minimum nurse-to-patient ratios. Inadequate nurse staffing levels is the single most frequently mentioned patient care problem among doctors. Many doctors are aware of specific negative outcomes for patients as a result of nurses having to care for too many patients at once, including medical errors and complications, improper medications, longer hospital stays, and even death.

Concern with RN staffing levels

Most doctors believe nurse staffing levels in Massachusetts hospitals are too low. An even higher number of doctors think that the quality of patient care is suffering due to understaffing of RNs.

- 78% of doctors think staffing levels of registered nurses in Massachusetts hospitals are too low
- 82% agree that the quality of patient care in hospitals is suffering because there are not enough registered nurses working in the hospitals

When doctors are asked to name the single biggest problem in Massachusetts hospitals that directly affects the quality of patient care, inadequate nurse staffing levels is the most frequent response (29%), followed by overcrowding (23%), and lack of quality staff (14%).

Most doctors are aware of specific instances when patients have been harmed as a result of RNs having to care for too many patients at one.

- 61% are aware of medical errors, such as improper medication or dosages due to nurses caring for too many patients at once
- 54% are aware of instances when registered nurses having to care for too many patients has led to complications or problems for a patient
- 43% are aware of longer hospital stays for patients as a result of RNs caring for too many patients at once
- 19% are aware of instances of patient mortality as a result of understaffing of RNs

Support for Legislation

Massachusetts doctors express high levels of support for legislation that would set flexible minimum nurse-to-patient ratios. Most doctors believe this legislation would improve the quality of healthcare in Massachusetts. A majority also believes that establishing these ratios could reduce healthcare costs.

- Nearly three-quarters (74%) of doctors favor passing legislation that would set flexible minimum nurse-to-patient ratios
- 72% of doctors think that passing this legislation would improve the quality of care for their patients
- 61% believe that by reducing nurse turnover and cutting down on complications to patients, this legislation could reduce healthcare costs