



October 15, 2007

## **Memorandum**

**To:** The Massachusetts Nurses Association

**From:** Chris Anderson

**Re:** Main findings of Past Patient Survey

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This memorandum summarizes the main findings of a telephone survey of 200 Massachusetts families who received hospital care in the Commonwealth within the last two years. Respondents were randomly selected using a RDD (Random Digit Dial) technique, which gives every household in the state with a telephone an equal chance of being called. Interviews were conducted between the dates of October 1 – 7, 2007.

### **Executive Summary**

An alarming number of recent hospital patients and their immediate family members believe their safety or that of their family was compromised by a lack of available nurses. Over one-quarter (28%) of those treated in a hospital in the past two years say that their safety, or their family member's safety, was compromised. Based on the total number of annual hospital visits, as tabulated by the Mass. Department of Health Care, Finance and Policy, we can estimate that roughly 235,000 patients a year feel that their safety is compromised by a lack of available nurses.\*

More than one-third (35%) of patients and families feel that their nurses had too many patients to care for at one time, and half (49%) think a higher quality of care could have been delivered if their nurses had fewer patients. Nearly three-quarters (73%) of past patients agree that the overall quality of patient care in Massachusetts hospitals is suffering due to nurses being forced to care for too many patients at once.

The problems patients and their families were most likely to observe as a consequence of nurses having too many patients include unacceptably long waits after pushing the call button for assistance (43%), long waits for medications and procedures (38%), nurses' lacking time to answer questions (27%), and nurses' being unable to arrive promptly when complications arose (25%).

Eight in ten patients support passing a law ensuring safe limits on the number patients assigned to a nurse at one time. By a 30-point margin patients and their families prefer a bill to establish minimum nurse staffing levels over the hospital industry's plan to post hospital staffing averages.

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\* The Massachusetts Department of Health Care, Finance and Policy reports 839,676 total patient discharges from Massachusetts hospitals in 2003, including deaths.

Patients' preferences for the plan to set patient limits for nurses is likely influenced by the fact that most (87%) say they did not have time to research information regarding staffing levels before going to the hospital. Very few patients (14%) are aware of the Patients First website; while just 4% have visited the website and only 2% report using the information on the website to make a decision about where to seek care.

The survey also asked patients for their reaction to data about hospital-acquired infections. Awareness of this issue has increased substantially recently and this survey indicates that facts about hospital-acquired infections are very concerning to patients and their families. Fully 91% of past patients and their families said that they were very (74%) or somewhat alarmed (17%) about established reports that each year more than 2 million people catch infections while they are in the hospital, and that 100,000 of them die.

## Summary of Findings

### *The Patient Experience*

As we have seen in study after study, nurses are perceived as the hospital employees most important to quality patient care.

- By a 2-to-1 margin, patients are more likely to say RNs (47%) than doctors (22%) have the greatest impact on hospital care among hospital employees; 18% say nurses aides have the biggest impact.

Most hospital patients believe that patient care in hospitals is suffering due to a lack of nurses working in the hospitals, which is making many fear for their safety or that of a family member.

- Nearly three-quarters (73%) of patients and their families think patient care in hospitals is suffering due to nurses being forced to care for too many patients at once.
- Over one-quarter (28%) of patients think their safety was at least somewhat compromised by a lack of available nurses and 15% think their safety was *extremely* or *very compromised*. Inpatients (30%) are more likely than outpatients (23%) to say their safety was compromised.

Slow response times when assistance is needed appears to be the primary factor causing patients to believe their safety is at risk. In addition, approximately one-fifth of patients say they are aware of situations in which patients suffered complications or fell as a result of nurses being forced to care for too many patients.

- 43% of patients and their families are aware of unacceptable waits for assistance after pressing the call button.
- 38% are aware of patients having to wait long periods of time for medications or procedures due to nurses caring for too many patients.
- One-fifth (21%) are aware of patients suffering complications

- 17% are aware of patient falls or slips due to nurses being unavailable.

### *Support for solutions*

Patients and their families express high levels of support for legislation to ensure there are enough nurses in Massachusetts hospitals.

- Eight-in-10 patients (80%) support a law requiring the Department of Public Health to set limits on the number of patients that can be assigned to a registered nurse at one time.
- By a 30-point margin, patients prefer the nurses' bill to set limits over the hospital industry's bill calling for the posting of staffing plans, 53% favor the bill sponsored by nurses and 21% favor the hospital industry's plan.

One of the reasons that patients and their families may favor limits on staffing levels over posting of staffing plans is that most say they did not have time to research staffing levels before going into the hospital. The survey also finds low awareness of the Patients First website, and very few patients report having visited the website or using information on the website to make decisions about where to seek care.

- Just 12% of patients and their families report that they had time to research staffing levels prior to their hospital visit.
- Only 14% were aware of the Patients First web site, with only 4% visiting the site and only 2% reporting that it played in a role in their decision on where to seek care,.