

# PATIENT-TO-NURSE STAFFING RATIOS:

## PERSPECTIVES FROM HOSPITAL NURSES

A Research Study Conducted by  
Peter D. Hart Research Associates  
on behalf of  
AFT Healthcare

April 2003



*A Union of Professionals*

**AFT Healthcare** 

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## INTRODUCTION

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AFT Healthcare commissioned Peter D. Hart Research Associates, Inc., to conduct a study among hospital nurses who currently provide direct patient care to examine their perspectives on nurse staffing levels in hospitals. Specifically, the study was designed to measure average patient-to-nurse staffing ratios among hospital nurses and to examine the extent to which hospital nurses perceive problems related to understaffing in their hospitals. Special attention is paid to the differences between Med-Surg nurses with lower and higher patient-to-nurse ratios for evaluating the relationship between staffing levels and nurses' perspectives.

This study is intended to complement data from a number of recent research studies that have examined the effect of patient-to-nurse staffing ratios on such variables as mortality rates and the quality of patient care in hospitals, as well as nurse recruitment and retention. Findings from these studies have shown that higher patient-to-nurse staffing ratios are associated with higher mortality rates and greater incidence of medical complications and errors, lower job satisfaction, and more burnout among nurses. The findings that follow in this report provide additional insight into the effects of nurse staffing levels from the perspective of the nurses directly providing patient care in hospitals today.

The survey data demonstrate that nurses view understaffing as a serious problem when it comes both to the quality of care that patients receive and to nurse burnout. For example, three in five (59%) hospital nurses say that the staffing level at their hospital is having a negative impact on the quality of care patients receive. More than half (54%) believe that when it comes to the quality of care, understaffing at their hospitals is a very or fairly serious problem, and Med-Surg nurses with higher patient-to-nurse ratios (more than five to one) are especially likely to agree. When it comes to nurse burnout, fully three in five (62%) nurses have considered leaving the patient-care field during the past two years, and Med-Surg nurses with higher patient-to-nurse ratios are more likely than average to have considered leaving the patient-care field.

The study's data on patient-to-nurse ratios explain why nurses are so concerned about staffing levels today. Med-Surg nurses report that on average they are caring for 8.0 patients per shift, with more than two-thirds (69%) caring for six or more patients and 82% caring for five or more. When we ask Med-Surg nurses how many patients they feel they should be caring for, however, the result is very different: an average of 5.2 patients, with 83% saying six or fewer patients. When we crosstabulate the results of these two questions, we find that two-thirds (67%) of Med-Surg nurses believe that they are responsible for more patients than they should be, whereas just 25% feel that they are caring for the right number of patients or fewer. A majority of both Operating Room nurses and Emergency Room nurses also report that they care for more patients during a typical shift than they feel is appropriate.

In addition, the findings show an overwhelmingly strong majority (82%) of all hospital nurses favor legislation that would establish a maximum number of patients that nurses can be required to care for at one time, including 57% strongly in favor. This support is consistently strong across all regions of the country and for nurses in all three hospital settings. Support is particularly strong among younger nurses. Nurses also say that increasing staffing levels is the single most important change needed to improve conditions for nursing professionals today.

## Methodology

A national telephone survey was conducted among 601 registered nurses who currently provide direct patient care in a hospital in one of the following settings: Operating Room, Emergency Room, or a Med-Surg unit. Interviews were conducted from March 27 through 31, 2003, and the margin of error for this survey is  $\pm 4\%$ .

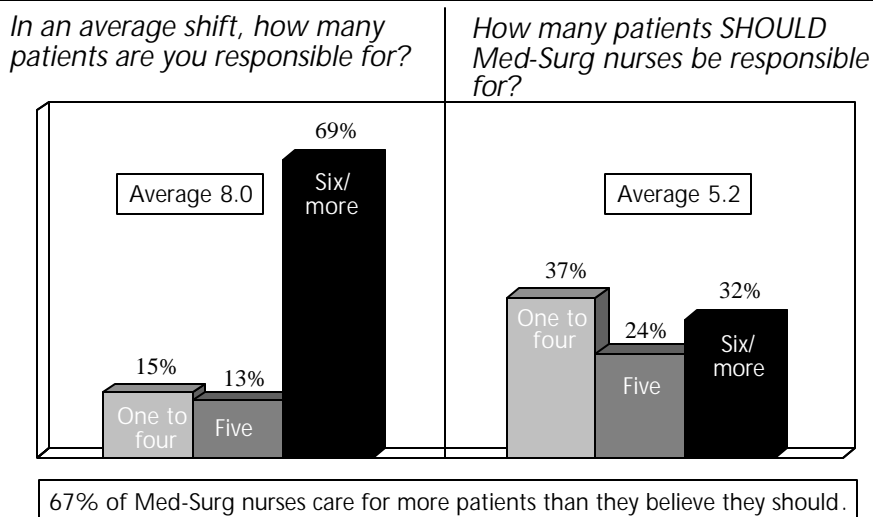
The survey was conducted among a national sample list of registered nurses purchased from American Medical Information, Inc., of Omaha, Nebraska. The national database from which the names were selected is compiled from state licensing information and is updated monthly. Respondents were screened to determine whether they qualified as current direct care hospital nurses, and a nationally representative sample of current nurses were interviewed.

## Key Findings

**On average, Med-Surg nurses care for eight patients during a shift, including more than two-thirds who care for six or more patients. However, Med-Surg nurses say they should be responsible for only five patients during a typical shift.**

Overall, over two-thirds (69%) of Med-Surg nurses are responsible for six or more patients during an average shift, and 82% are responsible for five or more patients. Just 15% say that they typically care for one to four patients, particularly notable given that research has linked greater rates of negative medical outcomes to patient-to-nurse ratios of higher than four to one. These findings also represent much higher patient-to-nurse ratios than nurses believe is appropriate. While the mean number of patients that Med-Surg nurses currently are responsible for delivering care to is 8.0, the mean number of patients they feel a Med-Surg nurse in their unit should be responsible for is 5.2 -- a very substantial disparity. Virtually two-thirds (61%) of Med-Surg nurses agree that their patient-to-

## Med-Surg Nurses Care For More Patients Than They Feel They Should



nurse ratio should be five to one or lower, yet more than two-thirds are faced with a patient-to-nurse ratio exceeding that level.

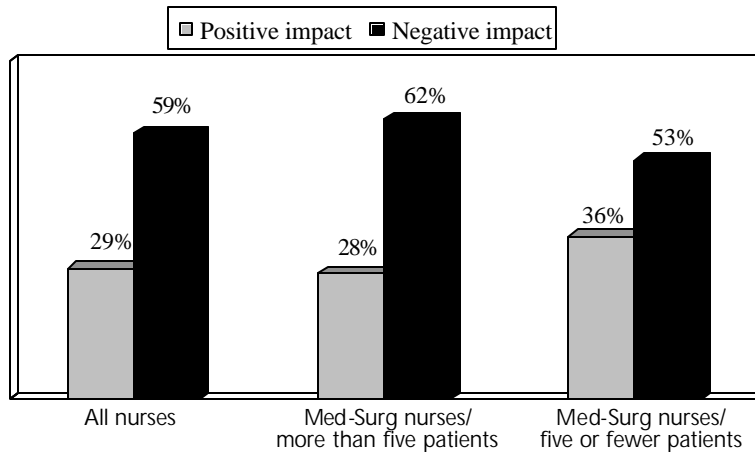
When comparing the figures of the number of patients Med-Surg nurses report caring for and the number of patients they feel each nurse should care for during an average shift, we find that two-thirds (67%) of Med-Surg nurses are caring for a greater number of patients than they feel they should be. Likewise, Operating Room and Emergency Room nurses also are caring for more patients than they feel they should. Approximately half of Operating Room nurses (47%) and Emergency Room nurses (52%) believe that they are currently caring for a greater number of patients than nurses in their department should be during an average shift.

**Hospital nurses believe that understaffing is a serious problem that affects the quality of care patients receive.**

Not surprisingly, nurses perceive a serious staffing shortfall. Fully three in five (61%) hospital nurses say that the nurses at their hospital are responsible for too many patients, whereas only 2% believe that the nurses at their hospital could safely provide care for more patients. This view is shared by Med-Surg nurses (62%, including 72% of those responsible for more than five patients per shift), Operating Room nurses (58%), and Emergency Room nurses (58%). Furthermore, the staffing situation is getting worse for all types of nurses. Two in five (40%) Med-Surg nurses, more than half (55%) of Emergency Room nurses, and more than one-third (37%) of Operating Room nurses say that they are responsible for the care of more patients today than they were five years ago. By comparison, just 13% of all nurses think that they are now responsible for the care of fewer patients than in the past.

## Nurses Say Understaffing Affects Quality Of Care

*Impact of nursing staff levels on your hospital's quality of care*



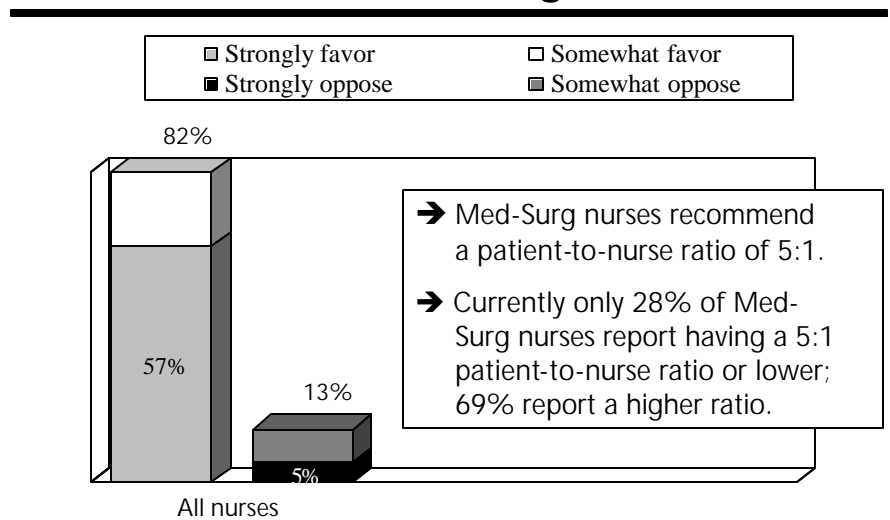
Remarkably, three in five (59%) hospital nurses view staffing levels as having a negative impact on the quality of care that patients in their hospital receive. Med-Surg nurses who are responsible for more than five patients are more likely to consider staffing levels to have a negative impact (62%, as compared to 53% of Med-Surg nurses caring for five patients or fewer), as are nurses who are responsible for more patients than they believe they should be (66%, as compared to 41% of nurses who are responsible for the right number or fewer patients).

Age and hospital size also factor in nurses' perception of the impact of staffing levels on the quality of patient care. Younger nurses, as well as nurses working in larger hospitals, are more likely to believe that staffing levels negatively affect the quality of care. For example, 68% of nurses under age 40 believe that staffing levels have a negative impact on the quality of care, compared with 54% of 40- to 49-year-old nurses and 56% of nurses age 50 and over who feel the same. Likewise, 63% of nurses in hospitals with more than 300 staffed beds believe that staffing levels have a negative impact, compared with 50% of nurses working in hospitals with 100 or fewer staffed beds who agree.

**Hospital nurses overwhelmingly support staffing ratio legislation.**

Fully four in five (82%) hospital nurses support legislation that would establish a maximum number of patients that nurses can be required to care for at one time, with 57% strongly favoring and 25% somewhat favoring such legislation. Just 13% say that they are opposed. This high level of support is consistent among Operating Room (84% in favor), Emergency Room (84%), and Med-Surg (80%) nurses. The proposal also enjoys powerful support throughout the country: Northeast (86%), West (84%), South (80%), and Midwest (75%). Support is particularly strong among younger nurses (91% favor, 62% strongly) and among nurses who have been working as a registered nurse for 10 years or fewer (90%, 62% strongly).

## Overwhelming Support For Maximum Staffing Standards



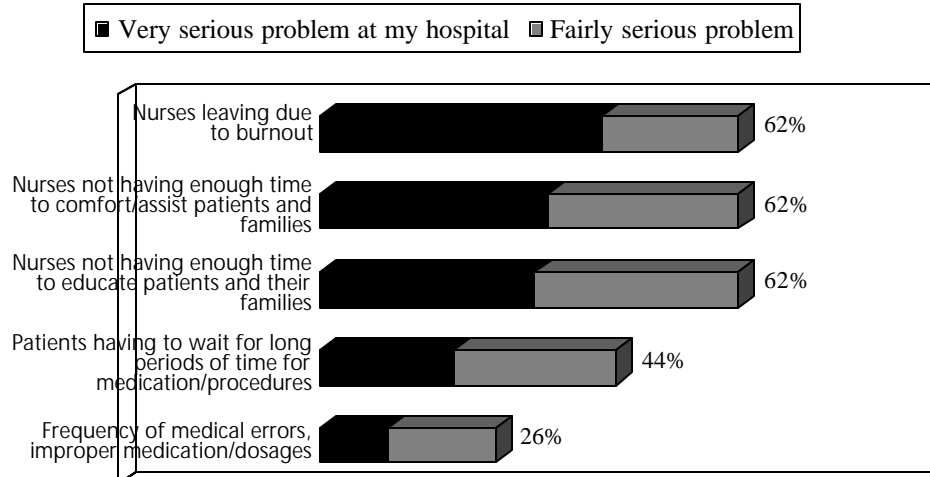
If such legislation were passed, 61% of Med-Surg nurses say that the maximum patient-to-nurse ratio should be five to one or lower (27% say five to one, 34% would set a lower ratio). The mean response on this question is a ratio of 5.2 to one. Recall that just 28% of Med-Surg nurses currently enjoy such a patient-to-nurse ratio of five to one or better, while 69% face a higher ratio during a typical shift.

**Nurses report that understaffing is contributing to a wide range of specific patient care problems, including insufficient patient education and medical errors.**

The survey also examines the contribution of overstaffing to specific problems facing many hospitals today. A majority (62%) of nurses say that nurses not having enough time to comfort and assist patients and their families is a serious problem because of understaffing, and 62% say the same with regard to nurses not having enough time to educate patients and their families. In both cases, Med-Surg nurses responsible for more than five patients are particularly likely to see these as very serious problems in their facility. This reflects a key issue for nurses as it relates to understaffing, as the nature of patient care becomes much more task-oriented given the lesser amount of time available for the human side of patient care.

More than two in five (44%) nurses say that patients having to wait long periods of time for their medication and medical procedures is a very (20%) or fairly (24%) serious problem due to understaffing. Emergency Room nurses are more likely to view it as a serious problem, with 55% saying it is a very (23%) or fairly (32%) serious problem. One in ten (10%) nurses view the frequency of medical errors, such as improper medication or dosage, as a very serious problem, and 16% view it as a fairly serious problem. In total, this represents one in four (26%) nurses who feel that the frequency of medical errors is a serious problem resulting from understaffing at their hospital.

## Nurses Recognize Several Problems As Result Of Understaffing

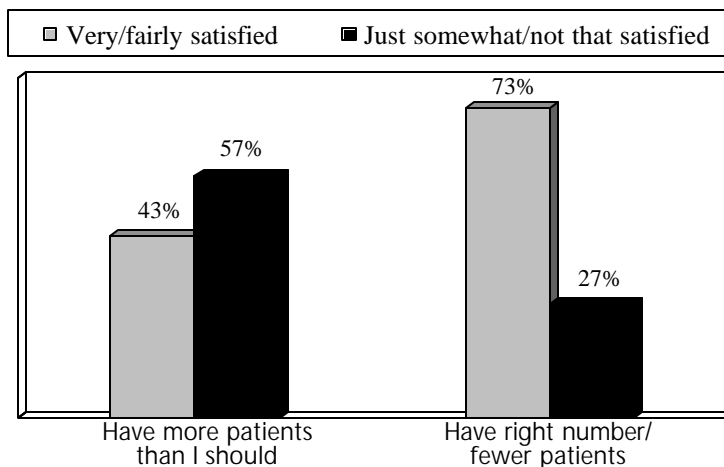


**Nurses with higher patient-to-nurse ratios report lower levels of overall satisfaction with conditions they face in hospitals.**

Overall, just half (52%) of hospital nurses report that they are very or fairly satisfied with the conditions facing nurses in hospitals today, while the other half are just somewhat (28%) or not that satisfied (21%). Staffing levels affect their job satisfaction, with the lowest levels of satisfaction among nurses who feel that they are responsible for more patients than they should be, as well as among nurses with higher patient-to-nurse ratios. For example, among nurses who feel that they personally are responsible for too many patients, 64% are just somewhat or not that satisfied, compared with 36% of nurses who feel that they are responsible for the right number of patients. In addition, 55% of Med-Surg nurses who care for more than five patients during an average shift are just somewhat or not that satisfied, compared with 42% of Med-Surg nurses who care for five patients or fewer.

## Job Satisfaction Lower Among Nurses Who Care For Too Many

*Satisfaction with conditions facing nurses in your hospital*



Half (49%) of hospital nurses believe that the situation for registered nurses where they work has been getting worse over the past few years, with just 18% saying that the situation is getting better, and 30% thinking that it is about the same. As with overall satisfaction levels, nurses with higher patient-to-nurse staffing ratios are more likely to see the situation as getting worse.

**Understaffing is contributing to the nurse shortage, with more than half of hospital nurses having considered leaving the patient-care field during the past two years.**

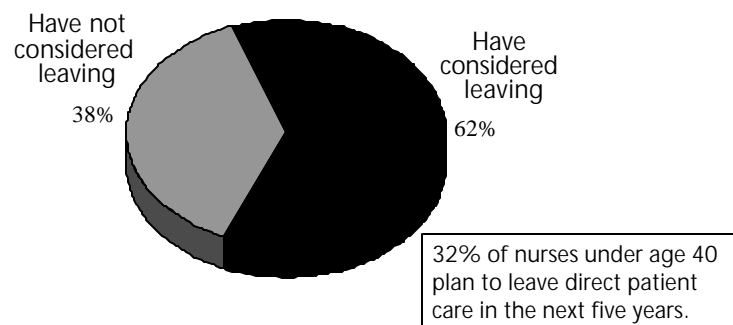
More than three in five (62%) hospital nurses say that nurses leaving the hospital due to burnout is a serious problem in their facility as a result of understaffing, with two in five (42%) saying it is a very serious problem. Overall, three in five (62%) of all hospital nurses have considered leaving the patient-care field during the past two years, which is an increase of eight percentage points since April 2001 when this question was asked in an earlier study of nurses conducted by Hart Research on behalf of AFT

Healthcare. Surprisingly, we find high levels of interest in leaving patient care across all age groups and seniority levels, including younger nurses and those newer to the field, suggesting mounting problems for the profession ahead as it relates to the nursing shortage. For example, when asked to guess how much longer they expect to provide direct patient care, one in three (33%) nurses say that they expect to provide care for five years or less, including 32% of nurses under age 40. Staffing levels also are related to the likelihood that a nurse has considered leaving patient care, as three in four (75%) nurses who feel personally responsible for too many patients have considered leaving.

## Three In Five Nurses Have Considered Leaving Patient Care

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*During the past two years, have you considered leaving the patient-care field?*



Among nurses who have considered leaving, the most common reason that they cite for having considered leaving the patient-care field is to find work that is less stressful and less physically demanding, a view especially shared by those who feel personally responsible for too many patients. In total, two in five (40%) of all hospital nurses who have considered leaving patient care say that it is to have a job that is less stressful and physically demanding rather than to have regular work hours, earn more money, retire, or be at home to raise children.

Nurses say that improving staffing levels is an important improvement to make to help mitigate the risk of nurse attrition. Fully two in five (43%) nurses believe that increased nurse staffing levels would do the most to improve their jobs, even more important than higher wages (26%), increased support staff (18%), or more flexible scheduling (7%). Among nurses under age 50 who expect to provide care for five years or less, more than half (54%) say that increased staffing levels would do the most to improve their jobs. These nurses also are much less likely to be satisfied with conditions facing nurses, to view staffing levels as having a negative impact on the quality of care that patients receive, and to view understaffing at their hospital as a serious problem. Clearly, high patient-to-nurse ratios are contributing to the nurse retention problem, as well as undermining the quality of patient care.



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**Impact of Staffing Levels on Attitudes  
Among Nurses**

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	All Nurses %	Expect To Leave Patient Care in 5 Years Or Fewer (Under Age 50) %
Staffing levels have a very or somewhat negative impact on quality of care patients receive	59	67
Understaffing is a very or fairly serious problem	54	61
Just somewhat or not that satisfied with conditions facing nurses today	49	67
Increased nurse staffing levels would do the most to improve job	43	54

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