



A Life-Saving Number: The Nurse-to-Patient Ratio

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The greatest fear for any patient in the hospital, and the biggest nightmare for their families, is that something will go wrong suddenly and no one will respond until it's too late. Beeping monitors are no help if their alarms go unheeded. Patient safety experts know that one basic way to keep patients safe and prevent death or injury from malpractice is to have enough nurses on hand.

How many is enough? Nursing leaders got the state of California, after a 10-year fight with the hospital industry, to mandate minimum nurse-to-patient ratios: one nurse for every five post-surgery patients, one nurse for every two intensive care patients, one nurse for every four children in the pediatrics ward.

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If you have a family member in the hospital, these numbers are worth keeping in mind. Ask the bedside nurse how many patients he or she is in charge of. And don't let hospital management confuse the issue by pointing out how many aides they have. Aides can plump pillows and give other comfort measures. But only a nurse can recognize when a patient is in peril and give lifesaving treatment.

A [new study](#) by a nursing professor at the University of Pennsylvania, Linda Aiken, asserts that mandatory minimum nurse-to-patient ratios like California's could prevent as many as 14 percent of post-surgery deaths in New Jersey hospitals and 11 percent in Pennsylvania.

Another important outcome of ensuring that nurses aren't overwhelmed by too many patients is that nurse burnout and job turnover go down, and overall quality of care improves, according to the study.

Theresa Brown, an oncology nurse in Pittsburgh, has an [op-ed piece](#) in the New York Times asking why bills in Congress to mandate minimums nationally haven't gone anywhere.

Saving money, of course, is the issue. But that's a penny-wise answer. Saving lives can be a lot cheaper in the long run.

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