



For Immediate Release

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Nurse Patient Ratios – useful roadmap to retaining nurses? CFNU study first on topic in Canada

Ottawa: Since the late 1990's efforts have been made to develop a pan-Canadian strategy for nursing. Unprecedented interest in health human resources has emerged, and from the outset, it was agreed that quality of nursing work life demanded immediate attention. In Canada, there is a renewed commitment to a coordinated, national approach to HHR planning. The 2003 First Ministers' Accord on Health Care Renewal—with its explicit goal of providing timely access to quality health services for all Canadians—recognized that planning for the right number and mix of providers, when and where they are needed, is crucial. In the Accord, the federal government, provinces, and territories made a commitment to work together to improve HHR planning and management with a report due December 2005.

Nurses from across Canada are asking their leadership to examine the feasibility of implementing formal nurse-patient ratios as a strategy to address the ongoing problems of heavy workloads, workplace injuries, turnover, and burnout among the nurses. Mandatory nurse-patient ratios are being viewed as an approach to promote patient safety by ensuring adequate nurse staffing levels.

Today the Canadian Federation of Nurses Unions (CFNU) is releasing the first Canadian discussion paper on Nurse-Patient Ratios authored by Dr. Gail Tomblin Murphy. The paper, *Enhancement of Patient Safety through formal Nurse-Patient Ratios: A Discussion Paper*, was made possible by contribution through Office of Nursing Policy, Health Canada.

The overall objective of the project was to examine what models to determine staffing levels exist currently in Canada and internationally (U.S. and Australia), and to learn the opinions of nursing stakeholders and of staff nurses.

We have learned that formal Nurse-Patient Ratios are not intended to address the nursing shortage in a direct manner. Nurse-Patient Ratios serve as a tool for matching available nursing human resources and patient care requirements and are focused on attending to quality of care issues. But experience has also demonstrated that in some jurisdictions, the concept of safe ratios has served as retention and even recruitment strategies.

“Nurse-Patient Ratios or nurse staffing plans may provide a formalized mechanism that nurses and the general public can use to hold health organizations accountable for their staffing decisions,” says Linda Silas, RN, BScN, President of CFNU. “Let's remember that legislation or collective agreement language would not be required if health organizations voluntarily limit utilization of services to closely match available nursing human resources, or, at the very least, listened to nurses,” she says.

Study author Dr. Gail Tomblin Murphy agrees with Silas. “We all know there is a strong body of evidence to suggest that by achieving optimal nurse staffing levels that closely match the acuity level of patients, the quality of care is improved. Furthermore, achieving optimal nurse staffing levels also enhances the quality of worklife for nurses,” Gail Tomblin Murphy emphasizes. She adds that, “Further dialogue needs to be undertaken to determine whether Nurse-Patient Ratios would be an effective means to improve patient safety and the well-being of nurses in the Canadian context.”

Sandra MacDonald-Rencz, Acting Executive Director, Office of Nursing Policy, Health Canada adds, “the debate on nurse-to-patient ratios relates to the stability of the nursing workforce in Canada. We are pleased to have been able to support this initiative and look forward to the dialogue this document will promote”.

“Nurses in this country remain committed to working with Canadians to achieve optimal health system, patient and nurse outcomes. Nurse-Patient Ratios could provide a useful roadmap, pointing the way for legislators to put enough nurses where they are needed, when they are needed,” concludes Silas.

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The CFNU is the largest organization of nurses in Canada with 130,000 affiliated members from coast to coast. Website: www.cfnu.ca

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