



December 2020

Canadian Federation of Nurses Unions

A Perfect Storm

COVID-19 & Canada's health care workforce crisis

Prime Minister Trudeau, premiers and ministers of health: Canada's health care is facing a perfect storm. Existing cracks in our system have been vividly revealed - and made worse - by the COVID-19 pandemic. It has become glaringly apparent that our health workforce is breaking under impossible strain, with dangerous implications for everyone.

Nurses are the anchor of Canada's health care system. Without frontline nurses, our health care system will cease to function. The nursing workforce, faced with unsafe work and staffing levels, is being eroded.

If Canada is going to weather COVID-19 and the challenges posed by future pandemics and an aging population, we must urgently reinforce our health care system and the workforce that we rely on to navigate our way through.

Nursing in crisis before COVID-19

Not enough staff to meet patients' needs, struggling at overcapacity and rampant workplace violence are resulting in crisis levels of mental illness among nurses, with many seeking to leave their jobs.

For many years, the Canadian Federation of Nurses Unions (CFNU) has been highlighting a nurse staffing crisis. After years of publishing ever-increasing rates of nurse overtime and absenteeism, the CFNU undertook two large-scale national studies, revealing the troubling status of the nursing workforce as we entered the first wave of COVID-19.

One study, conducted with Dr. Nicholas Carleton at the University of Regina, found that nurses suffer mental disorder symptoms, including PTSD, depression, anxiety, and panic disorder, at rates much higher than the general population, and the same or higher than public safety personnel, such as correctional workers. Almost all nurses (93%) had symptoms of burnout and almost one in three had clinical levels of burnout requiring medical attention.¹

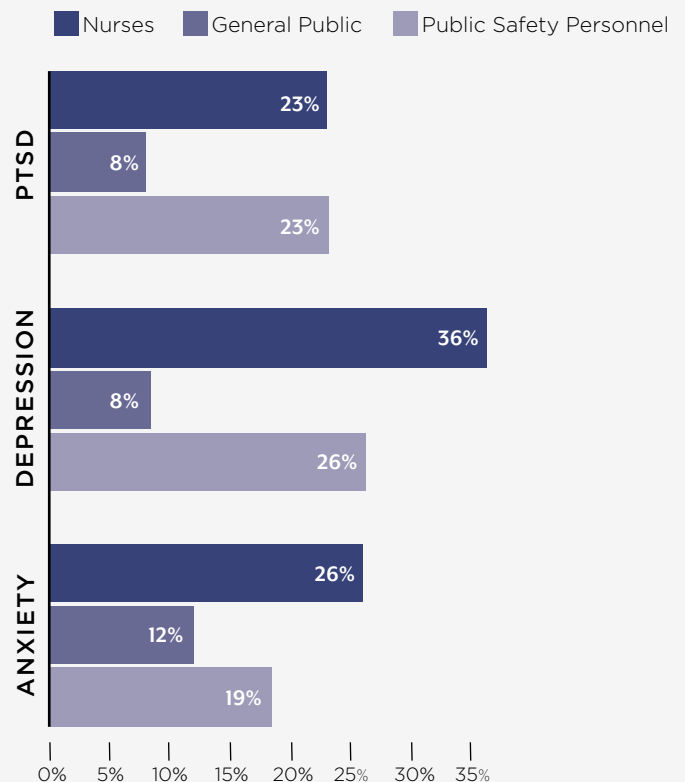
The top source of extreme stress nurses reported was short staffing, with 83% indicating that the regular core health staff is insufficient to meet the needs of patients.¹ Physical assault was the most frequently reported type of traumatic event (93%), and nearly half of nurses (46%) reported exposure to physical assault 11 or more times.¹

A national study conducted with Dr. Linda McGillis Hall at the University of Toronto confirmed that nurses' work environments are a major issue. An overwhelming majority of nurses reported facing verbal abuse (96%) and physical violence (81%) at work.¹¹ Most nurses suffer physical injuries (91%) at least once over the course of a year; over a third (35%) experienced multiple monthly injuries.¹¹

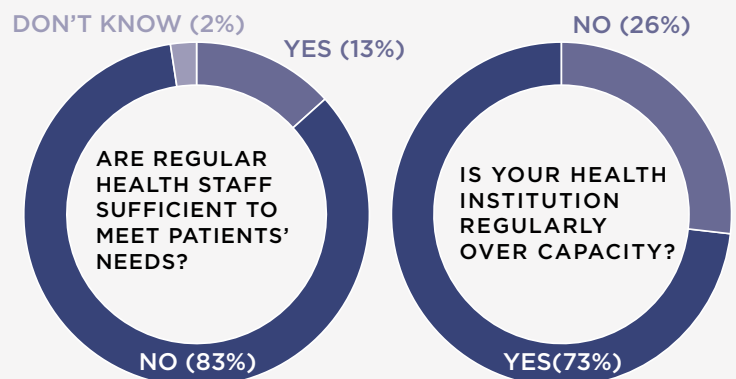
Violence contributes to nurse dissatisfaction. A staggering 60% of nurses said they intended to leave their jobs within the next year and more than one quarter of these nurses wanted to leave the profession.¹¹

It is clear that Canada has been facing a nurse workforce crisis since before the pandemic, with widespread staffing and safety issues contributing to mental and physical injuries, burnout and major impending retention challenges.

High rates of mental disorder symptoms¹



Top issues: inadequate staff, overcapacity¹



60%

intend to leave their jobs

A majority of nurses said they would leave their jobs within the next year; more than one quarter of these nurses said they will leave the profession altogether.^{II}

1 in 5

COVID-19 infections are health care workers

Canada's health worker infection rate is more than double the global average reported by the International Council of Nurses.^{III}

78%

increase in overtime

Canadian nurses' average weekly overtime hours increased significantly during the pandemic, from 5.8 hours in May 2019 to 10.3 hours in May 2020.^{IV}

COVID-19's impact on health staff

The pandemic has only worsened a precarious situation, further burdening the health care workers we all rely on most during a public health crisis.

All workers have the right to safe work, yet health care workers have faced a lack of proper workplace protections throughout the pandemic. Lack of access to adequate personal protective equipment (PPE), is adding to the stress and mental health burden experienced by nurses.

In the first wave, about one in five COVID-19 infections in Canada were health care workers, who are 10 times more likely than the general population to be infected.^{III,IV} Public health officials continue to discount this reality and fail to recommend airborne protections, putting workers and patients at heightened risk. Some nurses are also facing increased violence in their workplaces from frustrated and anxious patients.

Existing health care staffing is not enough to meet rising demand for care and ensure safe conditions. Hospitals are overcapacity across the country, Intensive Care Units are full, nursing homes are facing massive outbreaks and PPE shortages continue.

Meanwhile, existing staff are being told to pick up the slack, with concerning implications. According to Statistics Canada, nurses' average weekly overtime hours increased by 78% in May 2020 compared to the same time period in 2019.^{IV} Overtime was even more significant in Ontario and Quebec, surging by 108% and 176% respectively during the same period.^{IV}

Given the pre-pandemic data on retention, we can expect nurses to react to these untenable working conditions by leaving their jobs or exiting the profession. We will not know the complete picture of how many nurses will leave the profession until two or three years from now, and by then it may be too late to prevent a severe health staffing shortage.

The time to bolster our health care system, and the nurse workforce that anchors it, is now.

Recommendations

HEALTH HUMAN RESOURCES

- 1 Federal, provincial and territorial governments must make immediate targeted investments in full-time permanent nursing positions to ensure safe care that meets the real-time needs of patients and residents in health care facilities and the broader community.
- 2 The federal government must reinstate the Chief Nursing Office to advise on health policy, liaise with provincial and territorial chief nurses and lead a national committee to plan and secure Canada's health human resource needs.

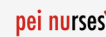
HEALTH AND SAFETY

- 3 Federal, provincial and territorial governments must act to urgently guarantee adequate supplies of PPE are available for health workers, including fit-tested N95 respirators or a higher level of protection.
- 4 Provincial and territorial governments should conduct annual standardized assessments of health care work environments to identify and implement measures enhancing the mental and physical health, safety and wellbeing of the workforce.
- 5 The federal government should introduce dedicated funding to appropriately prepare health care workers for the changing health care needs of all people living in Canada.

WE ARE CANADA'S NURSES

We represent close to 200,000 frontline care providers and nursing students working in hospitals, long-term care facilities, community health care and our homes. We speak to all levels of government, other health care stakeholders and the public about evidence-based policy options to improve patient care, working conditions and our public health care system.

Member Organizations



From coast to coast to coast, we acknowledge the ancestral and unceded territory of all the Inuit, Métis, and First Nations people that call this land home. The CFNU is located on the traditional unceded territory of the Algonquin Anishnaabeg People. As settlers and visitors, we acknowledge the importance of these lands, which we each call home. We do this to reaffirm our commitment and responsibility in improving relationships between nations, to work towards healing the wounds of colonialism and to improving our own understanding of local Indigenous peoples and their cultures.



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