HEALTH CARE: *International study will try to identify how today's standard of nursing has affected patient care*

On the brink of exhaustion

Budget constraints have taken a toll on Ontario nurses

BY JENNIFER BROWN
STAFF WRITER

Nurses hope a five-nation study will confirm what they've been saying for years — hospital cutbacks have hurt patient care and pushed them to the brink of exhaustion.

For almost three decades, Carol Alfenore has dedicated her life to nursing. But in the last 10 years, financial belt-tightening by the province and hospital administration has forced drastic change to the way she and her colleagues deliver care.

"I think, in Canada, nurses are still running faster and faster trying to maintain the care level they are used to giving and the burnout level is high and getting higher," said Alfenore, president of the York County Hospital chapter of the Ontario Nurses Association. "But whether or not patients are worse off will be interesting to see. To empirically study it will be of benefit to the patient and will ground in actual statistics what nurses have been feeling — that care does equal quality of nursing."

Announced earlier this week, the study in Canada, England, Scotland, Germany and the U.S. will try to make a direct link between the current changes in hospital nursing practices and patient care.

Patient re-admission rates after discharge, death and complication rates will be compared with each hospital's pattern of nursing.

The study also comes at a time when there's an industry-wide shortage of nurses — especially in specialty areas such as labour and delivery, mental health and cardiac care. That means specialists in those fields are under added stress, even when hospitals have the money to hire.

As an RN in York County's labour and delivery unit, Alfenore says she spends more time with her patients than her colleagues in other units who are spread more thinly.

"Our unit is unique. We do spend a lot of time with our patients and the majority do have high job satisfaction," she said.

But nurses in medicine, surgery and emergency see a high turnover of patients and intensive care has seen a major change in nursing delivery — nurses often care for more than one critically ill person at a time. In the past, one-on-one nursing in intensive care was the norm.

And with more severely ill patients coming through hospital doors, but no real increase in staff, the pressure has increased in most wards — especially at York County where nursing layoffs have occurred for the past two years.

Even in hospitals where layoffs haven't taken place, pressure exists because those who are admitted to hospital are sicker than ever before.

"We haven't had (nursing) cuts because the hospital and community is still growing, but we've had pressure, so the workload on nursing staff has increased. We have more and more patients every year and the level of acuity is increasing," said Markham Stouffville Hospital president Elizabeth Woodbury.

STAFF PHOTO/ROB ALARY

Registered nurse Carol Alfenore believes a five-nation study of nursing care will ultimately help patients.

"I also think the job of nurses has increased due to decreased length of stay. We often hear of the 'good old days' when patients would convalesce in hospital for seven days and some patients would require less attention than others. Now there aren't any low-needs patients. They're all high need in terms of nursing care."

Alfenore agrees many patients are rotating in and out of hospital "at alarmingly fast speed".

"We hardly see patients such as those having minor knee surgery or gall bladder day surgery," she said.

"Now they are very ill patients requiring a lot of nursing care. If you're in hospital these days, you're sick. (Administration) is still looking at downsizing and making do with less nurses, but patients are sicker and there is still no backing."

Expectations from the public also create demands, Woodbury said. Many people feel nurses should be available to comfort the family as well as the patient — something they don't always have time for during a hectic shift.

After years of cuts, many hospitals, such as York Central in Richmond Hill, have turned to re-engineering to find ways to do more with less, even though they are among the first to begin hiring RNs again.

Nurses were found to be changing beds and getting water for patients — tasks that were taking time away from more important duties.

Health-care assistants will now be used to free up nursing time on the units.

"There's no sense in them trying to do things like getting water. We have to make sure the right people do the right things and take the stress off nurses to do the job they were trained to do," said Nancy Webb, director of public relations at York Central Hospital.

"It seems so logical, but when everyone is so busy and you've got cutbacks, it's hard to see. But now the cuts have slowed and we're taking a look at what can be done."

York County is considering a test this fall using non-medically trained staff, known as "generic workers", to carry out duties such as kitchen work and housekeeping, but no hands-on care.

While she has concerns about just how much the generic workers will be allowed to do, Alfenore hopes it will lighten her load.

TRANSPORTATION: *Buttonville Airport might get 'temporary' funding from province*

Premier promises funds to save local airport

MIKE HARRIS
Province will keep Buttonville open if necessary

BY MIKE ADLER
STAFF WRITER

The province will act to keep Markham's Buttonville Airport from closing, and might even contribute cash if that's necessary, Ontario Premier Mike Harris pledged this week.

"This is going to be a challenge," he told reporters at Queen's Park on Monday.

The regional airport is losing its $1.5 million annual provincial subsidy this year, and its operators say the money is needed to ensure Buttonville's future.

Harris said the province can't afford to see the airport close because that "would put an unacceptable burden" on Pearson International and the Toronto Island Airport.

While it's largely up to the town and Buttonville's private owners, the province, the City of Toronto and the Greater Toronto Airport Authority are all interested in finding a way to keep Buttonville open, he said.

"We will facilitate any way we can," Harris, who often flies to and from Buttonville, promised.

He stressed the province wants to end its subsidy, but suggested it might give the airport money if it was satisfied there was no other way.

"It would have to be last call and it would have to be temporary in nature," Harris said.

The Premier's remark, although he said it was not a commitment for funds, seemed at odds with the determination of Ontario Transportation Minister Tony Clement this week not to offer Buttonville financial aid.

On Monday, Clement spokesperson Dan Schultz said the province would definitely not extend Buttonville's seven-year-old subsidy agreement, and that the town was told far in advance the deal would end. He advised the airport's operators to look to its corporate clients or the airport authority for funds.

Yesterday, Wallace Pidgeon, deputy press secretary to Harris, said he didn't see a contradication between statements from the two men.

If the airport needs $1.5 million a year, that's more than Markham or York Region, which already pays a $200,000-a-year subsidy to Buttonville, can afford, said Markham Regional Councillor Gord Landon.

The GTAA is the most logical source of support, since that organization, which operates Pearson, is responsible for air traffic across the GTA, Landon said.

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