

NURSING WEEK

MORE RNS EQUALS FEWER DEATHS

Nurses of all ages identify the same set of things that would make them quit their jobs: A lack of staffing, excessive workloads and physical exhaustion.

What would make them stay? Manageable workloads, better nurse-patient ratios, supportive managers, flexible scheduling and higher pay or more vacation.

Nurses at all stages of their careers cited almost the same reasons in a survey of more than 4,000 nurses in Ontario and Alberta.

Ann Tourangeau, researcher and professor at the University of Toronto's Bloomberg Faculty of Nursing, says retaining nurses is a huge issue for the health care system, because there is a "massive shortage of registered nurses" here in Canada and around the world.

Mortality rates go down significantly when nurses with baccalaureate degrees are taking care of patients.

From 1999 to 2006, the percentage of RNs looking after acute-care patients went down 9 per cent. And mortality rates increased by 2 per cent.

A 2006 study found that a 10 per cent increase in RNs on staff meant six fewer deaths per 1,000 patients discharged. Another study shows that a 10 per cent increase in university-educated nurses led to 9 fewer deaths per 1,000 patients.

She warns any trend toward hiring lesser-trained health-care staff, such as unlicensed aides, to do nurses' work is simply dangerous, despite the cost savings.

Nurses, she says, are the "surveillance system" for patients, who can "foresee problems before they become visible."

For example, a nurse would know that dark colouring on the foot of a diabetic patient is the start of gangrene, which could go overlooked by anyone less trained.

"It's past experience, past knowledge, current knowledge, patient information, the (patient's) situation — nurses put that all together," she says.