

Behind the Front Lines

A recap/critical look at health care news and the reality behind the reporting from the viewpoint of front-line Ontario registered nurses

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Three Things You'll Learn in This Issue:

1. **Tired nurses are a risk to patient safety**
2. **Proof that more RNs = better care** – [go](#)
3. **Choco Bites a hot story** – [go](#)

Nursing Week Coverage Focuses on Cuts

Media coverage of Nursing Week 2010 was widespread in Ontario, but rather than celebrating the profession, much of the coverage was of cuts to RN positions.

Cuts were announced during Nursing Week – held to celebrate the profession of nursing and coinciding with Florence Nightingale's birthday – in communities such as Peterborough and Chatham ([source](#)). As the government was announcing more Nurse Practitioner-led clinics (*Queen's Park Briefing, May 14, 2010*), media was covering more RN cuts in several other areas of the province.

It was a fine balancing act for ONA spokespeople to discuss the latest round of cuts – bringing the total number of RN cuts to more than 2,100 – while maintaining a celebratory attitude during this major nursing event ([source](#)).

Patient Safety at Risk Due to Increasing Nursing Fatigue

A new research report ([source](#)) has verified what ONA members have been saying for years: increasing levels of overtime are causing high levels of nursing fatigue – and increasing the risk to patient safety.

The report received relatively little media coverage, despite the fact that it was released during Nursing Week 2010.



The *Hamilton Spectator* did a piece on the study ([source](#)) but its focus was more on the effect on the RNs and less on the implications for patient safety. Other research has shown a correlation between fatigue and rising rates of medical errors.

ONA members have long sounded the alarm about the effects of the nursing shortage and RN cuts – long hours of overtime, being called back in on days off, difficulty getting vacation time – and the subsequent burnout experienced by registered nurses.

Now the report, “*Nurse Fatigue and Patient Safety*,” has highlighted this serious issue and says it must be addressed by policy decisions at all levels of the health care system.

Researchers surveyed 7,000 RNs working in all sectors of health care. More than 55 per cent reported feeling “almost always fatigued” during work, and 80 per cent reported feeling always fatigued after finishing a shift.

The RNs said fatigue interfered with their ability to make good judgements and sound decisions, and pointed to “relentless and excessive workloads, ongoing staffing issues and sicker patients” as the cause.

The research was conducted by the Canadian Nurses Association and Registered Nurses' Association of Ontario. The report recommends that all levels of government provide the funding needed to increase the number of RNs in the system to ensure safe care for all patients, require organizations to make public their absenteeism and disability rates, support nurses to manage fatigue while at work and allow them to decline additional work assignments.



What is ONA?

The Ontario Nurses' Association (ONA) is the union representing 55,000 registered nurses and allied health professionals and more than 12,000 nursing student affiliates providing care in hospitals, long-term care facilities, public health, the community, clinics and industry.



Who is Linda Haslam-Stroud, RN?

ONA President Linda Haslam-Stroud, RN (pictured), is a veteran renal transplant nurse who is an expert spokesperson on a range of issues. Linda is available to comment on everything from workplace violence, patient care, health care policy in Ontario, the flu pandemic, nursing cuts, public health and much more. Simply contact ONA's media relations officer, Sheree Bond, at (416) 964-8833, ext. 2430 if you would like to interview Linda on a health-related issue.

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UNDER THE RADAR

News the Media is Missing

Increasing RN Staffing Lowers Patient Death Rates

A new study makes a scientific connection between RN staffing levels and patient outcomes – which sheds new light on the implications of RN cuts that continue in Ontario.

Conducted by the Health Research and Educational Trust, the study has concluded that legislation in California mandating nurse staffing levels has resulted in fewer patient deaths ([source](#)).

California became the first state to implement minimum registered nurse-to-patient staffing ratios in acute care hospitals (in 2004). The study compares the complication and death rates of surgical patients in hospitals in states without mandatory nurse-patient ratios with those in California hospitals. The results are startling:

“Nurses in California care for an average of one fewer patient each, and these lower ratios have sizeable effects on surgical patient mortality. If the average patient-to-nurse ratios in those hospitals [without minimum ratios] had been equivalent to the average ratio across the California hospitals, we get 13.9 percent fewer surgical deaths...”

California nurses believe the mandated nurse-patient ratios have improved nurse recruitment and retention and job satisfaction, reduced workloads and improved the quality of care for patients.

The *New York Times* ([source](#)) covered the study but the story received no coverage in Ontario. This province has no nurse-patient ratio legislation, and has the second-fewest nurses per capita in the country, just behind British Columbia.

In addition, Ontario health care facilities are continuing the trend to replacing registered nursing positions with lesser-paid workers.

Mandated Nurse-Patient Ratios:

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André Picard Wins Top Journalism Award for Health Care Column

Globe & Mail columnist André Picard writes thought-provoking and insightful pieces on health care issues, so it's not surprising that he's won the first-place prize in columns at the National Newspaper Awards.

What was the subject matter of the prize-winning column? It wasn't for his coverage of the H1N1 pandemic, or health care funding, or the spread of antibiotic-resistant superbugs. No, Picard won for his column on Choco Bites ([source](#)).

More specifically, Picard's column – putting into perspective the e-Health Ontario spending scandal – won the top prize. In it, Picard writes that a bigger scandal than high-priced consultants expensing a \$3.99 Choco Bite is the provincial government's failure to create an electronic health records system.

Picard also writes that the “sheer powerlessness” of modern public servants and their transformation into “emasculated toadies by their political bosses” has led to stagnation.

We look forward to more of Picard's thoughts as health care in the province continues to evolve.

Health care on the front page?

Speak to front line nurses!

The Ontario Nurses' Association (ONA) is the voice of 55,000 front-line registered nurses and allied health professionals as well as more than 12,000 nursing student affiliates working in every sector of health care.

Need the real story?

Contact ONA.



www.ona.org

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Behind the Front Lines – an electronic newsletter that takes a look at the stories behind the stories. Great background info, insight and a resource for every journalist who writes about health care. E-mail shereeb@ona.org today to receive your copy.