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

Volume 8, No. 3
June 2016

Five Things You’ll Learn in This Issue:

1. Effects of RN Cuts, Bed Closures Showing – go
2. Nursing Cuts Numbers Explained – go
3. Ontarians Becoming Health Care Activists – go
4. New Report Shows Need to Reclaim the Role of the Registered Nurse – go
5. Northern Nurses Raise Funds for Red Cross – go

Click here to access previous issues online.

UNDER THE RADAR

Workplace Violence Trial Illustrates Risks Nurses Face

Reports on the trial of Brockville Mental Health Centre on five charges under the Occupational Health & Safety Act are making the issue of workplace violence against nurses very real (source 1, source 2).

continued on page 5

Nursing Week 2016:
RN Cuts in Ontario Get Attention

National Nursing Week is supposed to be a time for the province’s RNs, NPs and practical nurses to celebrate their profession and the breadth and depth of skills they bring to patient care.

It has been increasingly challenging for many of Ontario’s nurses to celebrate Nursing Week as yearly rounds of RN cuts loom and have depleted their ranks in our hospitals. Ironically, Nursing Week 2016 was a hot topic exactly because of the large number of RN cuts.

ONA First Vice-President Vicki McKenna (centre) kicked off Nursing Week at Queen’s Park. ONA is calling for a moratorium on RN cuts in the province’s hospitals. Here, Vicki is joined by RN students and a long-time Toronto registered nurse.

The Ontario Nurses’ Association (ONA) kicked off Nursing Week with a joint media conference with NDP Leader Andrea Horwath to call for an immediate moratorium on RN cuts (source).

While ONA has tracked 1,440 RN cuts since the beginning of 2015, a breakdown of the number shows that’s the equivalent of 90 RNs cut per month, or three a day for 17 months. This also equates into the loss of 2.8 million hours of front-line RN care for Ontario patients.

The media conference was held before Question Period on May 9. A group of RNs from Windsor Regional Hospital travelled to Toronto to attend Question Period and later, be present for the reading of a petition of Windsor residents who are protesting the cut of 169 registered nurses.

continued on page 2
What is ONA?
The Ontario Nurses’ Association (ONA) is the union representing 60,000 registered nurses and allied health professionals and more than 14,000 nursing student affiliates providing care in Ontario hospitals, long-term care facilities, public health, the community, clinics and industry.

Visit us at:
www.ona.org
www.youtube.com/OntarioNurses
www.Facebook.com/OntarioNurses
www.Twitter.com/OntarioNurses

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.

How to reach us:
Ontario Nurses’ Association
85 Grenville Street, Suite 400
Toronto, ON M5S 3A2
(416) 964-8833
www.ona.org

RN Cuts in Ontario Get Attention, cont’d from page 1

RN cuts are impacting patient care. Since January 2015, 1,440 registered nurses have been cut from provincial hospitals. Here, RNs in Hamilton protest the cuts. St. Joseph’s Health Care Hamilton RNs also came to Queen’s Park during Nursing Week to witness the petition of Hamilton residents being read in the legislature.

Later in the week, RNs from Hamilton arrived at the legislature to witness their community’s petition against RN cuts be read.

As ONA First Vice-President Vicki McKenna, RN told Nurses’ Newsline (source), “the repercussions of such deep RN cuts are serious. Evidence from multiple studies shows that for every extra patient added to an average RN’s workload, the patient’s risk of suffering complications and even death rises by seven per cent.”

The real eye-opener is that a study recently found “the savings associated with the prevention of patient complications by critical care RNs was up to 10 times the cost of staffing the RNs.”

For hospital executives, the prospect of those savings should be an incentive to celebrate the skills of registered nurses.

RNs from Hamilton and ONA President Linda Haslam-Stroud (second from right) meet with members of the NDP at Queen’s Park before listening to their reading of a petition protesting RN cuts at St. Joseph’s Health Care in the visitor’s gallery at Queen’s Park.
Effects of RN Cuts, Bed Closures Showing

Windsor Regional Hospital has had to send a number of patients by ambulance to Bluewater Health in Sarnia recently – evidence of the impact on deep cuts to RN positions and bed closures.

A surge in critically ill patients surpassed the hospital’s intensive care unit capacity (source) and the situation is now being pointed to by the Windsor Essex and Essex County health coalitions as an example of how inadequate Ontario government hospital funding is hurting patients.

Windsor Regional announced 169 RN cuts in January this year. ONA and its members have long warned that patient care is put at risk when RNs are removed from the bedside.

ONA has also long warned of a lack of “surge capacity” in our hospital system. The province has the fewest hospital beds per capita and the worst RN-to-resident ratio in Canada.

Two of the Windsor patients were sent to a 16-bed ICU at a different site in Windsor, and three were sent 90 kilometres by ambulance to Sarnia. An ICU nurse and respiratory technologist had to accompany each of the patients.

Nursing Cuts Numbers Explained

The Scarborough Mirror (source) recently reported on NDP Leader Andrea Horwath’s comments about the treatment of Scarborough hospitals.

With a Scarborough byelection looming, the Mirror published a thorough report on Horwath and Health Critic France Gelinas visiting Rouge Valley Health System’s Centenary campus and discussing the deplorable conditions of its operating rooms and ER.

The report notes that Horwath has been calling for a moratorium on nursing cuts, quoting the Ontario Nurses’ Association’s number – 1,440 – of “nursing cuts” since the beginning of 2015; the Health Ministry disputes the number, saying that in fact, under the Liberals, the number of nurses has gone up.

Wherein lies the truth?

As the union representing 60,000 registered nurses and allied health professionals, ONA is the organization that receives layoff notices from hospitals each time its registered nurse members are cut – usually to balance hospital budgets.

ONA tracks these numbers, with details of the positions, the unit these RNs work in, and whether the RNs were full-time, part-time or casual.

The number quoted by the NDP is an accurate reflection of RN layoff notices received by ONA. The discrepancy may come as the numbers the Liberals cite are a year behind ONA’s, and in some cases, RNs are being cut and some replaced by less-educated practical nurses (RPNs).

The Mirror quotes the hospital’s CEO as saying that staff adjustments have been made as registered nurses weren’t necessarily needed to care for hospital patients, and “adjustments” are meant to deliver the right care at the right time…

In early June, new RN numbers were released by the Canadian Institute for Health Information that show that Ontario now has the dubious distinction of being the worst province in Canada in RN-to-population ratio. Ontario now has just 711 RNs per 100,000 people, with the Canadian average being 841. Until 2015, BC was the worst, but Ontario has now taken its place.
Health-Care Cuts Creating Activists

While Torontonians remain a largely indifferent group to health-care cuts, many Ontario residents in smaller communities are getting angry and getting loud.

As the Sault Star reports (source), a recent Ontario Health Coalition town hall meeting attracted a good-sized crowd anxious to express “an abundance of beefs” about health-care services.

The report says that sentiments expressed by local OHC chapter director Margo Dale – that she is “sick of the rhetoric” coming from Queen’s Park about health-care cuts – were echoed by a number of speakers.

The Ontario Health Coalition has held a number of these town hall meetings and done their research. Coupled with the NDP’s acquisition of data about hospital overcrowding, the issue is becoming a hot topic at Queen’s Park.

In the Sault, the ER hallways are lined with patients awaiting a bed, and patients stay in the ER for as long as five days with no call buttons, oxygen, and out of the usual treatment area of nurses.

The ONA representative at Sault Area Hospital, Glenda Hubley, RN, has been calling for the public’s help in fighting health-care cuts. “Sometimes we can’t do it alone,” she told the crowd at the OHC’s meeting.

New Report Promotes the Need to Reclaim the Role of the Registered Nurse

ONA not only has the support of the provincial NDP regarding the need to stop cutting registered nurse positions, but also has the support of another nursing organization that promotes the necessity of reclaiming the RN’s role.

A special Nursing Week report by Jill Scarrow (source) notes that when budgets are tight, “RNs tend to be replaced with other care providers” to the detriment of patient care.

It is challenging for the public and the media to understand the difference between a registered nurse (RN) and registered practical nurse (RPN). Both are highly regulated nurses, with RNs possessing a four-year baccalaureate degree and practical nurses possessing a two-year college diploma. Both are nurses. The difference is that RNs are qualified to care for unstable patients whose health outcomes are unpredictable; RPNs are to care for stable patients with predictable outcomes. Ontario is “transforming” our system and our hospitals so that only the most acute, unstable patients are occupying hospital beds. This is exactly the kind of patient that an RN is educated to care for.

Grinspun’s organization released a new research report, “Mind the Safety Gap in Health System Transformation: Reclaiming the Role of the RN,” at the start of Nursing Week.

Despite its unwieldy name, the report makes some very valid points that back up what ONA has been saying for the better part of 15 years: stop replacing RNs with practical nurses in our hospitals.

The report found that tight hospital budgets have led many organizations to cut RNs in areas where patients are suffering from complex illnesses, such as the neonatal intensive care unit of St. Joseph’s Healthcare in Hamilton. That decision was later rescinded after a loud outcry from nursing organizations and the public, but that isn’t always the case.

Grinspun says that historically, “nursing…has gone like a water tap: on and off, according to budgets and political will.”

She says their research shows that Ontario now has three practical nurses working for every RN working, with employment of practical nurses growing three times as fast as RN employment.

That is a cause for concern, says Grinspun, as those patients in hospital beds are sicker and more complex than in the past.

The RNAO is now calling for all teaching hospitals, acute care hospitals, large general hospitals and cancer centres to be staffed only by RNs.

The organization says that the reduction in nursing jobs is “the crisis that truly needs to be addressed to make sure people have the care they need.”
ONA has been working to eliminate incidents of workplace violence in health care for decades. The media has done great work in supporting ONA’s initiatives, reporting on the attacks, embarrassing employers for the general laissez-faire attitude that has left nurses and health-care workers with the impression that violence is an expected part of the job.

Now, reporters from Brockville and Ottawa attending a Brockville trial are doing a great job of describing the reality of workplace violence. On the trial’s opening day, the Crown showed the courtroom a video of a patient’s attack on a registered nurse who was escorting a patient back to her room. The RN was stabbed multiple times in the head and neck, with one stab wound barely missing the nurse’s carotid artery.

The nurse, Debbie Vallentgoed, has yet to return to work, almost two years after the attack. She testified that she realized she was going to be attacked when the patient raised her arm in the air, said the reports.

Vallentgoed testified that at first she didn’t realize she’d been stabbed, though she noted that there was blood all over the floor. A fellow RN rushed to her aid and staunched the blood with towels before the RN was rushed to Kingston General Hospital.

What is so startling about this case and made beautifully clear by the reports is that the RNs knew they were at risk and were unable to prevent an attack. They testified that they “felt like sitting ducks” in the forensic unit of Brockville Mental Health Centre.

The nurses had requested that their employer conduct more random and consistent ward searches, install cameras in seclusion rooms and take other measures to minimize the nurses’ isolated contact with patients, said the reports.

The Ottawa Sun’s Blair Crawford made clear just how seriously ill the patient who attacked Vallentgoed is. The patient was sent to Ontario from Saskatchewan as that province did not have the capacity to care for her. She came with a warning, Crawford reports: “she didn’t like blond-haired, left-handed white women.”

The Brockville facility is facing charges including: failing to provide information, instruction and supervision for a worker; failing to reassess the risks of workplace violence and ensure policies and programs protect workers; failing to take every reasonable caution in the circumstances to protect a worker; and two counts of failing to ensure measures required by legislation are followed.
Northern Nurses Celebrate Nursing Week by Raising Funds for the Red Cross

ONA members in Kirkland Lake got into the spirit of Nursing Week, launching a series of activities with help from Mayor Tony Antoniazzi and donating funds to the Red Cross for relief for Alberta fire victims.

The *Northern Daily News* report quoted ONA Local Coordinator Debbie McCrank’s remarks to members at the kick-off of a week of celebrations. McCrank noted that Nursing Week “gives well-deserved recognition to the nursing profession, and it also gives nurses an opportunity to get involved in activities that are fun and stress free. And that’s just about the opposite of a nurse’s typical day.”

These nurses had an array of Nursing Week activities to attend throughout the week, and in typical fashion, chose to use the funds available for purchasing gift bags to instead send a donation to the Red Cross.

The *Northern Daily News* also reported on Nickel Belt MPP France Gelinas calling for additional funding for hospitals in Northern Ontario. The NDP Health Critic said that health care “in the North is the silent crisis” of the current government. “Patients know it. And families feel it.” She contends that she receives daily complaints about services in the North and that front-line health-care workers feel the brunt of patients’ frustration.

Gelinas was speaking about the issue as Nursing Week was marked, keeping the issue of RN cuts in the spotlight at the legislature. She also supports the Ontario Health Coalition’s referendum on health care cuts.

Gelinas and Andrea Horwath called for stable and predictable health care funding from the government that “at a minimum, keeps pace with inflation and population growth.”