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STUDY RAISES CONCERNS ABOUT FREQUENCY OF NURSES' LONG WORK SCHEDULES

Issue Exacerbating Problem of Nursing Recruitment, Retention and Quality of Care for Patients

New York, NY (March 13, 2006) – A study published in the April issue of the *American Journal of Nursing* reveals that a large proportion of nurses are working schedules that exceed the recommendations of the Institute of Medicine raising industry-wide concerns about fatigue and health risks to nurses as well as the safety of their patients.

“Extended work schedules (which include more than 12 hours in a 24-hour period and more than 40 hours in a seven-day period) are common in nursing and contribute to problems with nursing recruitment and retention as well as compromising the health and well-being of nurses and, ultimately, patient safety,” said Alison Trinkoff, ScD, RN, FAAN, professor, University of Maryland School of Nursing, Baltimore, MD. “Previously, little was known about the prevalence of these work schedules across all nursing specialties. This study analyzed hospital staff nurses, those working more than one job, single parents and those over age 50 as well as adverse schedule factors, such as mandatory overtime, on-call hours, and working on a scheduled day off.”

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The Study

The study was based on quantitative survey data collected as part of the Nurses Worklife and Health Study. The sample consisted of 2,273 randomly selected RNs. Demographic data, information about respondents' primary job (position, workplace, and specialty) and specific work schedule variables were analyzed, including data on actual hours worked, breaks, overtime and on-call requirements, time off between shifts, and how often respondents worked more than 13 hours per day and on scheduled days off. Respondents were also asked about activities outside of work, commuting time and non-nursing activities and chores.

More than a quarter of the sample reported that they typically worked 12 or more hours per day, as did more than half of hospital staff nurses and more than a third of those with more than one job. A third of the total sample worked more than 40 hours per week and more than a third had worked six or more days in a row at least once in the preceding six months. Nearly a quarter rotated shifts.

A quarter of the nurses with more than one job worked 50 or more hours per week and they were more likely to work many days consecutively, without sufficient rest between shifts and during scheduled time off. Single parents were as likely to work 13 to 15 hours per day, 50 to 60 hours or more as those with more than one job. Seventeen percent of all nurses worked mandatory overtime as did almost a quarter of the single parents. Nearly 40% of the total sample and more than 40% of hospital staff nurses contended with on-call requirements.

A Growing Issue

In the past decade there has been an increased emphasis on reducing health care costs. Nurses, the largest segment of the health care workforce, are greatly affected by these changes. Many health care facilities have eliminated jobs resulting in extended work schedules for those nurses who remain. Studies have shown that many nurses are leaving their jobs and the profession because of long hours and excessive job demands.

Recent literature has also shown the detrimental effects of extended work schedules and excessive demands on the safety of patients and the health of nurses including chronic stress that adversely affects the neurological, immune and cardiovascular systems. Injuries from chronic exposure to high job demands can lead to an increased likelihood of musculoskeletal injuries and disorders. Fatigue, pain and deficits in performance and reaction time as a result of increased exposure to physical demands and insufficient recovery time, leads to physiologic depletion or exhaustion and a greater risk of errors. It also reduces control over scheduling and affects social lives and commitments outside the workplace creating conflicts between job and family. Long work hours are also associated with unhealthy habits such as smoking, excessive caffeine intake, alcohol consumption, poor diet and lack of exercise.

“We limit the work hours of pilots, flight attendants, bus drivers, and others when the public’s safety is at risk. Why have we not imposed restrictions on work hours for nurses when patient lives and the health of the nurses are at stake?” asked Diana Mason, RN, PhD, FAAN, editor-in-chief, *American Journal of Nursing*. “Scheduling with minimal overtime could address the nursing shortage by retaining and attracting nurses. Mandatory overtime has no place in health care and should be eliminated through institutional or public policies.”

About AJN

Funded in 1900, the *American Journal of Nursing* is the official publication of the American Nurses Association and the largest and oldest circulating nursing journal in the world. It is published by Lippincott Williams & Wilkins (www.LWW.com), a leading international publisher of professional health information resources for physicians, nurses, specialized clinicians and students. Nearly 275 periodicals and 1,500 books in more than 100 disciplines are published under the LWW brand, as well as content-based sites and online corporate and customer services. LWW is part of Wolters Kluwer Health, a leading provider of information for professionals and students in medicine, nursing, allied health, pharmacy and the pharmaceutical industry.

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