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**Relationship Between Nurse-Patient Ratios and Nurse Burnout**

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Relationship Between Nurse-Patient Ratios and Nurse Burnout
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Carroll College Nursing Department

### Question:
In registered nurses (RNs), how do small nurse-to-patient ratios compared to large nurse-to-patient ratios influence nurse burnout?

### Background:

- Nurse-to-patient ratios refers to the number of patients a nurse is responsible to care for during his/her shift.
- Nurse burnout is a physical, mental, and emotional state caused by chronic overwork and a sustained lack of job fulfillment and support (“Nurse Burnout,” 2019).
- The effects of burnout include high turnover rates, absenteeism, and reduced quality of patient care and affect nurses all over the world.
- Job dissatisfaction in nurses is 4% greater than the average of all U.S. workers (Aiken et al., 2002).
- “California is the only state that stipulates in law and regulations a required minimum nurse to patient ratio to be maintained at all times by unit” (ANA, 2015).

### Study

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<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Results</th>
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<td>“Hospital nurse staffing and patient mortality, nurse burnout, and job dissatisfaction” (Aiken, Clarke, Sloane, Sochalski, &amp; Silber, 2002).</td>
<td>Level IV, cross-sectional study that surveyed Pennsylvania nurses to look at how nurse-patient-ratios impact nurse burnout, patient mortality, and failure to rescue (p. 2002).</td>
<td>43% of nurses experienced high emotional exhaustion. For each additional patient per nurse, burnout levels increased by 23% and job dissatisfaction increased by 15% (p 1990).</td>
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<td>“Relationship between nurse staffing levels and nurse outcomes in community hospitals, Thailand” (Nantsupawat, Nantsupawat, Kulnavitikul, &amp; McHugh, 2015).</td>
<td>Level IV, cross-sectional study that looked at the relationship between nurse staffing levels and job dissatisfaction, emotional exhaustion in community hospitals in Thailand” (p. 114).</td>
<td>The average nurse-to-patient ratio was 1:11 per shift. 31.85% of nurses reported high emotional exhaustion (p 115).</td>
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<td>“Registered nurse perception of patient assignment linking to working conditions and outcomes” (Choi &amp; Miller, 2018).</td>
<td>Secondary analysis and descriptive study that looked at how nurse-to-patient ratios effect nurse outcomes, working conditions, and job satisfaction.</td>
<td>78% of RNs with ratios between 2-5 patients per nurse rated this assignment as appropriate (p 534). Nurses who reported appropriate ratios had high job satisfaction.</td>
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<td>“The relationship between UK hospital nurse staffing and emotional exhaustion and job dissatisfaction” (Sheward, Hagen, Macleod, &amp; Ball, 2005).</td>
<td>Level IV, cross-sectional study that surveyed Scottish and English nurses to explore the relationship between dissatisfaction and emotional exhaustion and workload.</td>
<td>27% of Scottish nurses and 35% of English nurses reported burnout. For Scotland and England the average nurse-to-patient ratio was 1:7 (p 55).</td>
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<td>“Hospital restructuring, workload, and nursing staff satisfaction and work experiences” (Burke, 2003).</td>
<td>Level IV cross-sectional study that involved random surveying of members of the Ontario Nurses Association.</td>
<td>Nurses who reported an increase in nurse-to-patient ratios reported higher levels of emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and greater workloads (p 104).</td>
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<td>“A tale of two systems--nurses practice environment, well being, perceived quality of care and patient safety in private and public hospitals in South Africa: A questionnaire survey” (Coetzee, Klopper, Ellis, &amp; Aiken, 2013).</td>
<td>Level IV cross-sectional survey. The aim was to “examine the practice environment...and nurse workforce outcomes in medical and surgical units in private and public hospitals in South Africa.”</td>
<td>45.8% of nurses scored in the high burnout range. Almost 1/3 were dissatisfied with their jobs. High nurse-to-patient workloads are associated with poor nurse reported quality of care, patient safety, and nurse workforce outcomes (p 170).</td>
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### Results:

- Large nurse-to-patient ratios are associated with high burnout.
- Lower, more appropriate nurse-to-patient ratios are correlated with higher job satisfaction, lower levels of emotional exhaustion, and less cynicism.
- The relationship between large nurse-to-patient ratios is clear but it remains unclear what the ideal ratio should be.
- Although the results are quite clear, there seems to be an unwillingness to accept these links because of the cost and workforce implications (Sheward et al.)

### Application:

- These results allow nurses to advocate for their own well being.
- Bring this issue to the chief nursing officer and work up the chain of command for policy changes.
- Contact a state representative/senator to sponsor a bill for mandated nurse-to-patient ratios.
- Nurses can reach out to the Montana Nurses Association and union representative to advocate for lower nurse-to-patient ratios.