

The Nursing Shortage and Nurse/Patient Ratios

[VIDEO TRANSCRIPT – June 23, 2023]

Lauren Magarino (Scripps News): America has a nursing shortage. Millions felt the pain of that shortage during the pandemic, which left existing nurses burnt out and even pushed many of them out of the field entirely. The shortage is expected to intensify as the American population ages and the need for health care grows. But efforts to mitigate this problem are underway across states. In Florida, a \$10 million commitment from two leading health care systems is hoping to boost nurse numbers. There are also bills in states like New York and Pennsylvania that would implement a patient to nurse ratio to help ease their burden. Joining me now, Dr. Anne Dabrow Woods, the Chief Nurse at Wolters Kluwer in Pennsylvania. Thank you so much for joining us. And I want to start with basics here. Can you just tell us a little bit about the factors that are behind the nurse shortage?

Dr. Anne Dabrow Woods: Well, you know, the nurse shortage right now really came to be after the pandemic. We always knew there was going to be a nurse shortage. But what we didn't anticipate is that nurses were going to retire at the amount that they did and younger nurses were going to leave the profession and other nurses were going to decide to leave the bedside because things are so difficult at the bedside right now.

Lauren Magarino (Scripps News): So it's really coming from different directions here. Can you give us an idea of the effect that this shortage is having on existing nurses?

Dr. Anne Dabrow Woods: Well, right now, the nurses that are left at the bedside are very, very unhappy because they feel that they can't practice safely. So if we can't practice safely at the bedside because we don't have an adequate number of experienced and trained nurses to practice alongside of us, patient care is going to be impacted. You know, nurses want to take care of people. That's what we do. But now we're being faced with a situation where we can't do that because there's simply not enough of us at the bedside to care for people who need the help.

Lauren Magarino (Scripps News): So we mentioned this a little bit at the top. There are now bills in New York and Pennsylvania where you are, which would implement a minimum patient to nurse ration or ratio, if you will. What are your thoughts on these bills and do you think that's a good step to address that pressure that you just explained?

Dr. Anne Dabrow Woods: You know, in a better health care world, health care systems would start to regulate themselves, but that is not what we're seeing. So nurses are actually thankful that organizations in the States are stepping up and saying that you need to do something to help guarantee patient safety. In order to do that, they need to implement minimum patient nurse ratios.

Lauren Magarino (Scripps News): Can you talk about the costs of this, though? You know, could this bill potentially increase health care costs or affect the number of patients a hospital can treat?

Dr. Anne Dabrow Woods: Well, certainly it's going to have an impact on costs for health care organizations. Our labor workforce in hospitals is 50% of our overall budget. But that means we have the biggest chance to make an impact on revenue or reimbursement. If you're able to bring an adequate number of properly trained, educated, experienced nurses to the bedside, you're going to improve patient outcomes. And in turn, that will improve reimbursement for health care systems.

Lauren Magarino (Scripps News): When you talk about, though, bringing those nurses back to the bedside, what incentives exist right now to really make that happen?

Dr. Anne Dabrow Woods: Well, that's the issue, Lauren. We have a lot of incentives, bonuses to get nurses to come back to work. But when they get into the work situation and they realize the staffing is not safe, they want to leave. So what we really need to do is focus more on retention, keeping the talent within the organization instead of letting it leave, doing things like flexible staffing, really making sure that the benefits that are offered, really what nurses and other health care professionals want. But the bottom line is having enough nurses at the bedside so that if you have a patient that's in trouble, you know, there's somebody there to back you up who's experienced and has the skills to be there to support you.

Lauren Magarino (Scripps News): Very quick here, we've got about 30 seconds. One thing that I remember from previous reporting on this issue are the use of non-compete contracts that nurses would sign that would help with that retention. It's my understanding some things have shifted around non-compete clauses or let or really the contracts themselves. Has that affected anything regarding this issue on a shortage of nurses?

Dr. Anne Dabrow Woods: Well, if the health care system was doing what it was supposed to do, we wouldn't really need non-compete clauses, right? Because the talent would stay where it belongs. So absolutely with non-compete clause is you have nurses that aren't going to be able to work around where they live. And if they can't work where they live, they're not going to come back to the bedside to take care of the people who are in need of care.

Lauren Magarino (Scripps News): Dr. Anne Dabrow Woods, Chief Nurse at Wolters Kluwer, thank you so much for being with us. Important subject here. Thank you.

Dr. Anne Dabrow Woods: Thank you so much.