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# Nurse errors, overtime linked

Mistakes tripled when they worked more than a 12-hour shift, a Penn study found.

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Medical errors are more likely to occur when hospital nurses work significant overtime, according to a University of Pennsylvania study published today.

The study found that mistakes — or near-mistakes — happened more often when staff nurses worked more than a 40-hour week. Errors tripled when they worked more than a 12-hour shift.

"Nurses are no different than other occupational groups," said Ann Rogers, the study's lead author and associate professor at Penn's School of Nursing. "When they work longer hours, the risk of errors goes up."

Some experts view medical mistakes as the largest problem in health care. A 1999 report by the Institute of Medicine estimated that 44,000 to 98,000 patients died each year from preventable errors in the hospital. Medication mistakes were the

most common error.

Many experts view nursing as an integral part of hospital care, ensuring that the correct medicine reaches the bedside and that patients are monitored closely.

Today's study, published in the journal *Health Affairs*, involved 393 nurses across the country during a four-week period. It found that more than half the errors involved medication administration, such as: Drugs were given to the wrong patient or at the wrong time or in the wrong dose. The study did not track what happened to the patients.

In all, the study reported 134 errors and 413 near-errors during the study period. Thirty percent of the nurses reported making a mistake.

"It certainly helps document what we think intuitively: Working really long hours is not good for patients," said Pamela Mitchell, associate dean for research at the University of Washington

School of Nursing. "What remains to be known is whether limiting work hours will reduce errors."

The Penn researchers said that overtime after 12-hour shifts should be eliminated. "We recognize there are emergency situations when long shifts are unavoidable," Rogers said. "But it seems they are becoming the rule rather than the exception."

Pattie Gardner, a 42-year-old intensive-care nurse, said she frequently worked a 16-hour day at MCP Hospital, especially in the last five years. Sometimes, she said, she volunteered. Other times, the hospital required it.

"I was sluggish," said Gardner, who now works only 12-hour shifts at Temple University Hospital and no overtime. "I couldn't give my best care."

Margaret Shiver, a spokeswoman for Tenet Healthcare Corp., which owns MCP, said it was possible but "rare" for nurses to work 16 hours straight under a previous contract. She said mandatory overtime was eliminated at the hospital as of June 1.

The Penn study is considered the first in the nation to measure medical errors against the number of hours nurses worked. Nurses compiled that information in logbooks. They reported working longer than their scheduled shift about 80 percent of the time. On average, they spent an additional 55 minutes on the job.

Of the 5,317 shifts that were studied, 40 percent involved at least a 12½-hour workday.

It is common for nurses to work shifts of 12 hours or longer. Others are scheduled for shorter days but may be required to work longer for overtime.

"The dilemma is going to be that some nurses work overtime as part of their salary agreement," said Michele Camacho, head of the Pennsylvania Nurses Association. "They have to do it. It is pretty clear that this is going to have a positive and negative effect for nurses."

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