Principles of Nurse Staffing in Intensive Care

Sandra Fairley
Clinical Nurse Specialist in Neurocritical Care
Nurse staffing in intensive care

- Recommended staffing levels in the UK
- Nurse staffing, patient outcomes and quality
- The EU Working Time Directive and shift patterns
- Neurosurgical Critical Care at The National Hospital
  - Not enough nurses
  - Not enough patients
Recommended staffing minimums in the UK

Adult intensive care

- Every patient in ICU should have access to a registered nurse with post-registration qualification in the specialty

- Ventilated patients should have 1 nurse : 1 patient

- Nurse patient ratio should not fall below 1 nurse : 2 patients

- Units of 6 beds or more should have a supernumerary nurse coordinator (senior critical care qualified nurse)

‘Gold standard’ ratio set by the British Medical Association in 1967

1 registered nurse : 1 patient

Revised in 2009

British Association of Critical Care Nurses
British Association of Critical Care
Royal College of Nursing
Recommended staffing minimums in the UK

*Neonatal and Paediatric intensive care*

**Neonatal unit**
- High dependency: 1 : 2
- Intensive Care: 1 : 1
- Supernumerary nurse coordinator on each shift

**Paediatric unit**
- Level 1 - 0.5 : 1 (1:1 in cubicle)
- Level 2 - 1.5 : 1
- Level 3 - 1.5 : 1
- Level 4 - 2 : 1

2001 British Association of Perinatal Medicine
2003 & 2009 Department of Health
Paediatric Intensive Care Society
Recommended staffing minimums in the UK

- Strict use of defined nurse : patient ratios be replaced by a more flexible system based on patient dependency

- Dependency harder to predict
  - Patient’s condition can change
  - The ‘agitated’ patient
UK review of 61 incidents in which patients died revealed clear evidence of a link between nurse staffing levels and patient outcomes in acute care. (Health Committee Report 2009)

- Routine observations not taken (14 cases)
- Observations taken but deterioration in the patient’s condition not recognised (30 cases)
- Delay in medical attention reaching the patient (17 cases)
Nurse staffing, patient outcomes and quality

- 2007 review in Canada and the U.S. (*Kane et al*) showed reduction in risk of poor outcome greatest with patient : nurse ratios
  - < 3.5 surgical patients per nurse
  - < 2.5 ICU patients per nurse

- Each additional patient assigned to a nurse was associated with an overall increase in risk
  - 17% for medical complications
  - 7% for hospital acquired pneumonia
  - 53% for respiratory failure

- The relationship between higher nurse staffing and improved patient outcomes is not linear but shows diminishing marginal returns (*Lankshear et al.*’2005)
Nurse staffing, patient outcomes and quality

Increase in infection rates when staffing levels are low

*National Audit Office (2009)*

High profile cases in UK identified the disastrous effect of too few nurses

Investigation into Mid Staffordshire NHS Foundation Trust

March 2009

House of Commons Health Committee

**Patient Safety**

Sixth Report of Session 2008–09

Volume I

Report, together with formal minutes

Reducing Healthcare Associated Infections in Hospitals in England

REPORT BY THE COMPTROLLER AND AUDITOR GENERAL | HC 1554 Session 2008-2009 | 12 July 2009
Nurse staffing, patient outcomes and quality

The importance of skill mix

Nurse staffing levels associated with better outcomes in ICU and in surgical patients

Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality
US Department of Health (2007)
UK shift patterns

European Working Time Directive (EWTD) 1998

Ensuring that staff are well rested is critical to patient safety and quality care

Working Time Directive

Frequently Asked Questions for trust implementation teams

June 2009
Changes in shift patterns in UK

Prior to EWTD
● Medical staff worked 8 and 24 hour shifts
  ➢ Doctors ‘on call’ and could rest if clinical duties allowed

● Nursing staff worked 8 and 12 hour shifts – never 24 hours
  ➢ Nurses ‘on duty’ at bedside – ‘sleeping ‘seen as act of ‘gross misconduct’

Over last 10 years
● Introduction of ‘long day’ and ‘long night ‘ for medical and nursing staff
  ➢ Similar to shift patterns in other countries (US, Australia, Japan)

● Move from ‘on call’ to shift system for medical staff – 8 and 12 hour shifts
  ➢ British Medical Association support
  ➢ Criticism from Royal Colleges of Physicians and Surgeons about impact on medical training and therefore patient care

● No change in length of shift for nurses – still 8 and 12 hours
  ➢ Supported by Royal College of Nursing who provided evidence of adverse impact of long working hours on nurses
European Working Time Directive (EWTD) 1998

*Legislation setting minimum requirements to Improve work–life balance and reduce sleep deprivation*

- An average of 48 hours working time each week
- 11 hours continuous rest in 24 hours
- 24 hours continuous rest in 7 days (or 48 hrs in 14 days)
- 20 minute break in work periods of > 6 hours
- For night workers an average of no more than 8 hours work in 24 (this can be extended in areas with a 24 hour service)
Impact of shift patterns

Errors increase when staff are working under pressure and when tired
National Audit Office (2006)

Higher absence rates for staff working > 8 hours a day for any number of days in one month than for staff who never work > 8 hours / day
NHS Health and Wellbeing Survey (2009)
The National Hospital Neurosurgical Critical Care

9 ICU and 6 HDU beds
Nurse staffing for each shift

- **2 shifts in 24 hours**
  - Day 07:45 - 20:15
  - Night 19:45 - 08:15

- **10 nurses + shift leader**
  - 2 senior staff nurses / sister
  - 4 middle grade staff nurses
  - 5 junior staff nurses

- **Supporting staff Mon-Fri (9 - 5)**
  - Clinical Nurse Specialist
  - Education Sister
  - Unit Nurse Manager

**Shift leader allocates according to skill mix and experience**

**All staff rotate between ICU and HDU**

*Nursing establishment = 65*
Sickness / Absence Rates

- **SITU sickness / absence rates**
  - As a department and as individuals expected < 4%

- **Managing sickness / absence**
  - ‘Back to work’ interview on return from sickness
  - If > 4% over 2 monthly rosters \(\Rightarrow\) Informal process / supportive / occupational health referral
  - Formal process via Human Resources Department
  - Currently managing 2 staff members

- **Carer’s leave policy**
Not enough nurses!

- Importance of the supernumerary shift leader
- Ability to ‘draft in’ extra staff to cope with sudden shortages
- Impact on medical staff
- Impact on the patient
Not enough nurses!

Importance of the supernumerary shift leader ‘Nurse in charge’

- Role exists in most units of 6 beds or more
- Coordinating, supervising and supportive role
- Particularly important when short staffed and when skill mix not optimum
- Allocated patient if needed
Not enough nurses!

- Likely to be additional personnel available Mon-Fri 9 to 5
  - Clinical nurse specialist
  - Education sister
  - Critical care outreach nurse
  - Unit nurse manager

- Employ hospital ‘bank’ nurses to cover short notice sickness
  - Often own staff doing extra shifts
  - Funded by not filling all established posts (85%)

‘Drafting in’ other staff to cope with sudden shortages
Not enough nurses!

Nurse shortages do have an impact – *but limited since nursing and medical roles distinct*

- Nurses absorb extra workload

- ICU medical staff workload largely unchanged
  - Possible delay in undertaking procedures requiring an assistant

- Impact on other staff if elective theatre cases cancelled
Not enough nurses!

Impact on the patient

- Unnecessary sedation for the agitated patient
- Delay in implementing patient rehabilitation plans
- Cancelling elective surgery
- Sub-standard care
- Actual harm
  - Critical incidents
Not enough patients!

- *but this can change rapidly*

Making best use of valuable resources

- Redeploy elsewhere
  - Decision taken by senior nurse for hospital and nurse in charge of ICU
  - Never ‘popular’ but in contract
  - Always one-way flow of staff from ICU to ward - never the other way!
  - Show fairness - everyone takes their turn

- Flexibility in rota
  - Give annual leave
  - Move shift

- Time for training and education
Not enough patients!
- but this can change rapidly

- Training and education
  - On-line mandatory training updates
  - Competency training

- Management issues
  - Staff appraisals
  - Staff meetings

- Administrative duties

But hard to sustain for more than a few shifts!
Not enough patients!
- *but this can change rapidly*

Maintaining standards

Should be easy when unit is quiet *but* …..

- Often things are postponed until ‘later’ and then forgotten
- Important information not passed on to next shift
In summary

- Managing nurse staffing to meet the peaks and troughs of intensive care activity can be difficult
  - Nurse : patient ratio
  - Ratio of senior nurses : junior nurses

- Flexibility to alter duty roster is essential
  - Move staff from another shift
  - ‘Draft in’ staff – even for a few hours!

- Obstacles to flexibility include
  - Length of the shift
  - Travel time for staff
Good luck!