Low nurse to patient ratio drops hospital mortality rate

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Low nurse to patient ratio drops hospital mortality rate (Getty Images)

A study led by the University of Southampton and King's College London has shown that a higher registered nurse to patient ratio is linked to reduced risk of inpatient death.   
  
The study of staffing levels in NHS hospitals , published in the online journal BMJ Open, found that in trusts where registered nurses had six or fewer patients to care for, the death rate for patients with medical conditions was 20 per cent lower than in those where they had more than 10.   
  
Jane Ball, Principal Research Fellow NIHR CLAHRC (Wessex), said, "When determining the safety of nurse staffing on hospital wards, the level of registered nurse staffing is crucial; hospitals with higher levels of healthcare support workers have higher mortality rates."

Hospitals with more doctors per bed also had lower death rates but hospitals with more unregistered nursing support workers may have had higher death rates.   
  
The study analysed two measures over two years,the number of beds per registered nurse, doctor, and healthcare support worker in 137 acute care trusts; and the number of patients per ward nurse, drawn from a survey of just under 3,000 registered nurses in a nationally representative sample of 31 of these trusts.   
  
Age, emergency admissions and many other critically influential factors were also taken into account. Deaths for medical and surgical inpatients were also taken into account.   
  
This is an observational study, so no firm conclusions can be drawn about cause and effect, added to which the findings on nurse to patient ratios are based on only 31 trusts.Previous research suggests that the nurse to patient ratio has an association with outcomes such as mortality, but few studies have taken account of the impact of other members of clinical staff.   
  
Professor Peter Griffiths, Chair of Health Services Research at the University of Southampton, NIHR CLAHRC (Wessex), comments, "This does not, in itself, provide a robust basis to identify safe staffing thresholds but given the overall strength of evidence for an association, we are showing that, in England, the registered nursing workforce is clearly associated with patient safety. We found no evidence that having more support workers is associated with reduced death rates in hospital. Some of our findings suggest the opposite. A policy of replacing registered nurses with support staff may threaten patient safety."   
  
The study was published in the British Medical Journal