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Hospital **death** rates rise if fewer **nurses** are on wards  
  
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**Death** rates are higher on wards with fewer **nurses**, according to research that suggests the drive to replace them with less qualified staff should be reviewed.

Experts studied 137 acute hospital trusts in England and found lower **death** rates when there were more **nurses** working. Of the 31 trusts where the team knew the exact **staffing ratio** per **patient,**the researchers found that those with an average of six **patients** or fewer per registered **nurse** had 20 per cent lower **death** rates compared with trusts with more than 10 **patients** per **nurse**.

The findings, published in BMJ Open, also show a slight increase in **patient deaths** for trusts with the highest proportion of healthcare support workers.

The lead researcher, Jane Ball, from the University of Southampton, said: "At best, healthcare support workers make no difference, but at worst a higher level of support workers is linked to an increased risk of **death** during a hospital stay.

"The heavy reliance on support workers at the expense of registered **nurses** puts **patient** safety at risk. That's a situation that can lead to more **patients** dying during their hospital stay."

Janet Davies, the chief executive of the Royal College of Nursing, said: "The evidence is a clear warning about the impact on **patient** care and outcomes if we are to have too few registered **nurses**or are substituting them for healthcare support workers. [They] are highly valuable staff but they need to complement the registered nursing workforce - not replace it."

A separate study, published in the Archives of Disease in Childhood journal, found that a drop in the number of **nurses** caring for sick babies is leading to higher **death** rates.