**Patients are 20% more likely to die on a ward where untrained staff have replaced nurses**

* **Replacing just one nurse on average increases the risk of death by 21%**
* **The Government plans to deploy 2,000 nursing associates in 11 NHS trusts**
* **England has one of the lowest rates for qualified nurses in Europe**
* **Just 57 per cent of the staff are qualified nurses, the average is 66 per cent**

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Patients are a fifth more likely to die on wards where nurses have been replaced by untrained staff, a major study has found.

It has prompted researchers to describe plans to substitute qualified NHS nurses with ‘associates’ as a ‘risky experiment’.

The University of Southampton study found that replacing just one nurse with an untrained employee on a typical ward increased the chance of dying by 21 per cent. On the other hand, for every 10 per cent increase in qualified nurses on wards, the risk of death fell by 11 per cent.

Earlier this month the Government confirmed plans to deploy 2,000 nursing associates in hospitals at 11 NHS trusts from January to ease staffing shortages. Dubbed ‘nurses on the cheap’, they will be responsible for the vital monitoring of patients’ breathing and heart rate to check they are not deteriorating.

But research published in the British Medical Journal warned that ‘diluting’ the nursing workforce could put lives at risk. The study involved almost 19,000 patients and compared data from 243 hospitals in England, Belgium, Finland, Ireland, Spain and Switzerland. It found that for every 25 patients – a typical ward size – swapping just one nurse with an unqualified assistant increased the risk of death by 21 per cent.

The data also revealed that England has one of the lowest rates of qualified nurses among nursing staff in Europe. On average just 57 per cent of the staff are qualified nurses – the remainder are health care assistants. This compares to a European average of 66 per cent.

Professor Peter Griffiths, one of the study authors, said: ‘Reducing the skill mix of the nursing team is associated with increased mortality. I think this certainly shows that what’s currently being proposed needs to be regarded as a risky experiment and needs to be closely evaluated for the impact on patient outcomes.’

He said there was a risk that associates did not have the expertise to know when a patient was deteriorating. Most have no medical training, while a nurse has completed a three-year degree.

Janet Davies, chief executive and general secretary of the Royal College of Nursing, said: ‘This research reinforces the stark fact that for patient care to be safe, and high quality, you need the right number of registered nurses.

‘Substituting registered nurses with support staff quite simply puts patient care and patients’ lives at risk. It’s vital that this is not ignored as the new nursing associate role is developed.

‘Support staff are crucial in delivering patient care and the NHS could not operate without them, but they cannot and must not become a substitute for registered nurses.’

The NHS is severely short of nurses, with as many as one in ten posts empty – equivalent to 23,500 full-time staff. This is largely due to Government cuts in the number of training places between 2010 and 2013. Many hospitals are now having to hire nurses from abroad or spend up to £2,000 a shift on agency staff.

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