

Ball, J., Murrells T., Rafferty A.M., Morrow E., Griffiths P., "'Care left undone' by nurses in English National Health Service (NHS) hospitals; the association with staffing levels, perceived quality and safety of nursing care" BMJ Quality & Safety., (in press).

## **Abstract**

*Aim:* To examine the nature and prevalence of 'care left undone' by nurses in English National Health Service (NHS) hospitals and to assess whether the number of missed care episodes is associated with nurse staffing levels and nurse ratings of the quality of nursing care and patient safety environment.

*Background:* There is strong evidence to show that lower nurse staffing levels in hospitals are associated with worse patient outcomes. However, little is known about how variations in staffing impact on patients. One hypothesised mechanism is the omission of necessary nursing care caused by time pressure – "missed care".

*Methods:* Cross-sectional survey of 2,917 registered nurses (RN) working in 401 general medical/surgical wards in 46 general acute NHS hospitals in England.

*Results:* Most nurses (86%) reported that one or more care activity had been missed due to lack of time on their last shift. Most frequently missed were: comforting or talking with patients (66%), educating patients (52%), and developing/updating nursing care plans (47%). The number of patients per RN was significantly associated with the incidence of missed care ( $p < .001$ ). A mean of 7.8 activities per shift were left undone on wards that are rated as 'failing' on patient safety, compared with 2.4 where patient safety was rated as 'excellent' ( $p < .001$ ).

*Conclusion:* Nurses working in English hospitals report that care is frequently left undone. Missed care may be the reason low nurse staffing levels adversely affects quality and safety. Hospitals could use nurse-rated missed care as an early warning to identify wards with inadequate nurse staffing.

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