

# Registered Nurses: Every Patient's Voice in Health Care

**Every day**, registered nurses protect and advocate for the public—our patients—from the doctor's office and local hospital or clinic, to the halls of state and national government. It is a responsibility that RNs take very seriously and is the backbone of our health care system.

Nurses are generally the first health care professionals patients will see when they are admitted to a hospital and the last before they leave. As frontline health care providers, RNs are there at the bedside from the moment a patient is admitted, observing everything from vital signs to the patient's demeanor ... interacting with family members ... working with other members of the health care team to develop and carry out a course of treatment ... reporting changes in the patient's condition and recommending solutions ... educating the patient and family about medical conditions and treatments ... monitoring the patient's recovery, and much more.

RNs are our nation's advocates for good health care, whether lobbying Congress and the White House to provide quality health care for all or sounding the alarm about conditions in our hospitals. The 50,000 nurse members of the United American Nurses, AFL-CIO (UAN) advocate strongly every day for our patients with the protection of our union behind us.

## **UAN Case Study: Michigan Nurses Advocate for Safe RN Staffing**

Studies have shown when there are not enough RNs at the bedside—a problem exacerbated by poor hospital working conditions—patient care suffers. In one analysis, patients at hospitals with staffing ratios of four patients or more to one nurse suffered from cardiac arrest or shock 9.4 percent more often than patients at hospitals with ratios of 2.5 or fewer patients to one nurse. They also had 9 percent more urinary tract infections, 5 percent more gastrointestinal episodes, and 6.5 percent more cases of pneumonia acquired in the hospital. Surgery patients in short-staffed hospitals were 6 percent more likely to die from complications like shock or sepsis. (Needleman, Jack, et al. "Nurse-Staffing Levels and Quality of Care in Hospitals", *The New England Journal of Medicine*, May 30, 2002.)

Nurse members of the Michigan Nurses Association/UAN at Borgess Medical Center in Kalamazoo, Mich. are waging a campaign to educate patients, the public and their hospital about what is happening in their facility when there are too few nurses.

In the name of budget constraints, two years ago Borgess hospital management changed the RN-patient ratio on many floors so most RNs now care for five patients on a day shift and seven patients at night. In those two years, patient satisfaction dropped from 94.45 percent to 77.03 percent, patient falls and hospital-acquired pressure ulcers increased significantly, and there has been a decrease in staff satisfaction and retention.



**UNITED AMERICAN  
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Union nurses at Borgess are speaking out as nurse activists for their patients—compiling evidence-based research to back up their findings, carrying out a visible internal mobilization in the hospital and bringing their message to the community and hospital management.

MNA/UAN member Karen Barone, a staff RN in the hospital's ortho/neuro/trauma unit, says: "We are in a crisis and have decided that we will not stop until our patients can be guaranteed safe care."

Borgess nurses participate in unit-based councils which, according to the union contract, deal with staffing concerns and patient care issues and provide a vehicle for nurses to discuss the staffing model, quality data and nursing practice standards with unit supervisors and managers. Council members are increasingly using this forum to address changes in RN staffing levels and the effect this is having on patients.



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***Karen Barone, RN***

Barone points to the support that Borgess nurses have received through their union as critical in helping the nurses educate the public about staffing problems at their facility and work with management to find solutions that will protect patients and nurses: "Our union has rallied behind us, as nurses continue to say enough is enough. Our campaign is visible and strengthening daily. I've seen more and more nurses standing up to communicate tough issues to their supervisors, high attendance at union meetings and a strong sense of unity throughout the hospital."

## **UAN Nurses Call for State and National Action on RN Staffing**

As a nurse advocate not only for patients at Borgess but around Michigan and nationwide, Barone stresses the need to pass state and federal laws establishing minimum RN-patient ratios that keep patients and nurses safe.

UAN nurses across the country are joining together to fight for staffing legislation in state assemblies, Capitol Hill and beyond.

**"As nurses, no one is better suited to advocate for safe patient care than we are," Barone adds. "It will take every one of us doing what we can in our local bargaining units, as we are at Borgess, to concerted action at the federal level to ensure that our patients get the care they deserve and that nurses are protected."**



For more information on the Michigan nurses' campaign and patient care issues, please contact Suzanne Martin at UAN, 240-821-1825.

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