

How the nursing shortage is affecting the Canadian health care system, patients and nurses themselves

May 7 2024, by Lisa McKendrick Calder, Leanne Topola and Tanya Heuver



Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

If you worry that there are not enough health care providers to meet

health needs, you are not alone. [Seventy percent](#) of Canadians worry about access to care. One factor affecting health-care access is a [global nursing shortage](#).

The [increasing demand](#) for nursing services in Canada far exceeds the current supply. [Statistics Canada](#) reported in 2021-22 nursing had higher job vacancies than any other occupation, and nurses worked over 26 million hours of overtime.

In honor of [National Nursing Week](#) 2024 (May 6–12), we ask all Canadians to consider asking a nurse they know about the realities of the nurses' working lives.

A short-staffed health system

[Forecasting models](#) predicted a shortage of 60,000 nurses nationwide by 2022, and further predicted that would almost double to more than 117,000 by 2030.

Responding to shortages has led to changes in [staffing models](#), with fewer registered nurses, more licensed practical nurses and substantially more health-care aides. But even with these, there is a significant shortage, making it [essential to retain](#) existing nurses who have the required education and expertise.

In 2024 the [Canadian Federation of Nursing Unions](#) (CFNU), [conducted a survey](#) of 5,595 nurses. Thirty percent reported dissatisfaction with their career and 40 percent intend to leave nursing or retire.

Early career nurses were even more unhappy with 35 percent reporting dissatisfaction. This is due to [occupational disappointment](#), which is a feeling of disheartenment with career choice.

Job dissatisfaction in nursing

The majority of [CFNU survey](#) respondents attributed this disappointment to high workload and insufficient staffing. One cause of increased workload is caring for more patients than the bed capacity is funded or staffed for. Seventy percent of nurses reported their workplace regularly operated over capacity.

Even when care areas are understaffed, patient needs do not change and fewer nurses must meet these needs. Nurses are also influenced by shortages in other health professions such as [physiotherapy](#) by picking up extra duties to meet patient needs.

[Insufficient staffing](#) increases nurse workload to above normal demands and can threaten patient safety. When there is insufficient staff, nurses from other areas may be displaced to cover. For example, a nurse scheduled on an orthopedic unit might be displaced to neurology.

Forty two percent of nurses in the CFNU survey were displaced within the last year and 40 percent of them felt inadequately trained for the care area they were sent to.

Insufficient staffing can also lead to [missed care](#) where patient needs are unmet. [Common examples](#) include delay or failure to answer patient call bells or assist with personal care. Recently [neonatal intensive care units](#) highlighted they were functioning at 102 percent capacity and babies were not able to be fed as frequently.

Nurses' concerns with substandard care impact [job retention](#) as they may experience [moral distress](#). Moral distress is highly correlated with increased intent to leave [a job](#), or [the profession](#).

Safety and safeguards

When short staffed, nurses can be mandated to work beyond their eight- or 12-hour scheduled shifts. Under the [Registered Nurse Code of Ethics](#), the nurse has a duty to provide care to assigned patients until they are transferred to another appropriate care provider. Failure to do so is considered abandonment.

While off duty, nurses can be called in for mandatory overtime. The CFNU [policy statement](#) advocates against the use of mandatory overtime except in exceptional circumstances such as disasters. Despite this, in 2023 [Manitoba nurses](#) worked over one million hours of mandatory overtime. This is shocking, especially considering Manitoba has [legislation](#) limiting mandatory overtime usage.

From a safety perspective however, [restricting overtime](#) is not a solution, as it could leave patients at risk and nurses even more overburdened.

Not all overtime is mandatory. Many nurses receive frequent calls to [pick up extra hours](#), which leaves them unable to properly [recover between shifts](#). Declining overtime can [cause guilt](#) or a sense of letting colleagues down. In the CNFU survey, 62 percent of respondents worked overtime in the last month out of obligation.

The impact of the nurse shortage

Work hour factors impact [patient safety](#). The CFNU study "[Safe hours saves lives](#)" reported extended shifts led to deficits in patient care with nurses reporting decreased physical strength, focus, and ability to be compassionate. Fatigue [contributes](#) to medication errors.

Fatigue is correlated with [drowsiness and difficulty staying awake](#) both

on shift and when [driving home](#). This presents a danger to patients, nurses, and all Canadians on the roads.

Persistent [fatigue](#) has been found to impact nurses health. This influences work attendance which further worsens the shortage. [Canadian nurses missed](#) an average of 19 days of work for illness or leave in 2022, up from 14.7 days in 2021. This is more than double the sick time taken by [government and private sector](#) employees.

Many factors identified in this article contribute to nurse burnout. Canadian nurses have [increasing rates](#) of burnout. Ninety three percent of CFNU survey respondents [reported symptoms of burnout](#). Burnout has [been linked](#) with depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder.

Why a shortage of nurses matters

All Canadians ought to worry about the nursing shortage. Without addressing it, Canadian's ability to access safe, compassionate care will be compromised. When looking at the complex ways that the shortage impacts nurses and their work demands, it is no wonder why they experience occupational disappointment.

Work is underway by nurses alongside Canada's [Chief Nursing Officer](#). The [Nurse Retention Toolbox](#) provides guidance. The work to address nursing retention cannot be done by nurses alone. All Canadians need to advocate for conditions that support the well-being of [nurses](#) and other health care providers. This is essential for a safe, sustainable health system for us all.

This article is republished from [The Conversation](#) under a Creative Commons license. Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: How the nursing shortage is affecting the Canadian health care system, patients and nurses themselves (2024, May 7) retrieved 17 July 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2024-05-nursing-shortage-affecting-canadian-health.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.