

# PERSPECTIVE

Promoting Health Care Transparency and Competition



## Nursing Shortage Argument Does Not Hold Water

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By Kevin T. Kavanagh, MD

Nursing care has been a concern expressed in some sectors when the topic of a second hospital in Pulaski County is mentioned. Let's first define what nursing care is. There are actually three levels of nursing staff which deliver different types of care.

- A Registered Nurse (RN) has at least three years of post-high school education. RNs write the patient's nursing treatment plan and make patient assessments. They can also perform all tasks performed by LPNs and Nurses Aides. An RN can give patients medications, including IV "push" medications and blood transfusions.
- A Licensed Practical Nurse (LPN) has 18 months of post-high school education. They write assessments under the direction of an RN and may give patients most of their medications and take vital signs.
- A Nursing Aide is a technical position and some students are qualified after completing a high school technical course. Full-time training for this position should take approximately 6 to 8 weeks. Aides can take vital signs, clean and reposition patients but they cannot assess the patient or administer medications.

Multiple studies have shown that increasing a nurse's workload will increase patient complications. Inadequate hospital staffing with nurses has

been associated with an increase risk of lung problems after an operation, longer hospital stays, and less successful cardiopulmonary resuscitations ([Dimick, et al., Am J Crit Care 2001](#); [Dimick et al., Crit Care Med 2001](#); [Lang, et. al., J Nurs Adm 2004](#); [Garretson Nurs Stand 2004](#)). Increasing the RN to LPN ratio has also been found to produce a higher quality of patient care ([Needleman J, NEJM 2002](#)).

[Aiken, L.H., et. al. \(JAMA, 2002\)](#) studied patients after they had surgery and found that for each additional patient that a registered nurse had to care for increased the overall hospital death rate by 7%. Thus, if a registered nurse is responsible for four patients and her patient load is doubled, the patient death rate increases by 31%. In patients who had surgical complications, this rate is even higher.

Starting in 2005, the [State of California Mandates](#) that on general surgical and medical floors that a RN be responsible for no more than five patients and an ER Registered Nurse be responsible for no more than four ER patients, or two ICU ER patients or one trauma ER patient.

The availability of Registered Nurses to staff a new hospital in Somerset has been a topic of debate. Across Kentucky, hospitals have widely different nurse staffing levels. According to the [American Hospital Directory](#), RN Staffing levels vary across Kentucky by a factor of 2 as determined by inpatient days or hospital beds. The RN

*Summary*  
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### The "Nurse" is "The Hospital"

**Adequate  
Nursing Staff is  
a Requirement  
for Safe Hospi-  
tal Care.**

**Health Watch  
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Affordability**

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# Health Watch USA

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## Promoting Healthcare Quality, Access & Affordability

**Pat Tanner,  
president-elect of the  
Kentucky Nurses  
Association working  
conditions are the  
major factor in the  
shortage of nurses in  
hospitals.**

to LPN ratios can vary up to a factor of 10. Many hospitals with high nurse to patient ratios were staffed mostly with RNs, while some hospitals with the lowest ratios relied the heaviest on LPNs.

The American Nursing Association established the American Nurses Credentialing Center (ANCC) in 1971. The ANCC developed the [Magnet Recognition Program](#) for those healthcare agencies that have achieved excellence in nursing

care. In our region, two institutions have achieved this recognition: UK Hospital and Central Baptist. Marymount Hospital in Laurel County also has high nurse to patient staffing ratios. Marymount is a 89 bed hospital that has 168 full time RNs and 21 LPNs.

I believe the argument that we cannot find Registered Nurses does not hold water. I agree with the Kentucky Nurses Association President, Pat Tanner, who feels that

working conditions are major factors in the shortage of nurses in hospitals (Lexington Herald Leader, Aug 13, 2005). This is further [supported by the California Nursing Association](#) that once hospital nursing levels were mandated in California there was a 20% gain in Registered Nurses in the State with a 60%

increase in license applications The California Nurses Association also reported that a similar finding

occurred in Victoria, Australia with a 24% increase in employed nurses with mandatory staffing levels.

Registered Nurses are very important, but much of the daily patient care is performed by Nursing Assistants. These individuals can take vital signs, they bath patients and turn patients. They are responsible for carrying out much of the Nursing Care Plan which is written by the Registered Nurse. This care is very important, because without proper patient hygiene and repositioning there is an increase in infections and bed sores and the development of bed ulcers. Nursing aides are not in short supply and adequate staffing in a new facility should not be a problem.

Pulaski County is a rapidly growing community. We are constantly trying to recruit high paying technical jobs. To say we should not recruit a high-tech health care industry because we do not have workers is not in the best interest of the citizens of Pulaski County. Should we say the same thing about recruiting a software development firm or an airline manufacturing plant? Of course not. A hospital will take at least 3 years to construct. We have a community college which can expand and nurses who are currently leaving the county to find work. If we can recruit more industry which demands even more high-tech jobs, we may even start to lay the foundation for a four-year college in Somerset. This is the process of how communities grow.

*Kevin T. Kavanagh, MD is a Somerset Based Physician and Chairman of the Board of Health Watch USA.*

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## Contact Information

Kevin T. Kavanagh, MD  
Board Chairman Health Watch USA  
3396 Woodhaven Dr  
Somerset, KY 42503

[www.healthwatchusa.org](http://www.healthwatchusa.org)

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Authors are available for interviews by contacting Health Watch USA

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Email Address: [contact-mail@healthwatchusa.org](mailto:contact-mail@healthwatchusa.org)

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