

Patients die because nurses are too busy

Chris Smyth Health Editor

Patients die when nurses are too rushed to offer crucial care, according to a study that has prompted claims of NHS wards being dangerously understaffed.

Every 10 per cent increase in nurses admitting that they skipped tasks such as checking vital signs and giving medicine on time increases death rates by 16 per cent, the research suggests.

Previous studies found that death rates were higher in wards with fewer nurses and the latest findings strengthen the argument that there is a direct link because staff do not have time to carry out important tasks.

"If there are not enough registered nurses on hospital wards, necessary care is left undone and people's lives are put at risk," Jane Ball, who led the study at Southampton University, said. "These results give the clearest indication yet that registered nurse staffing levels are not just associated with patient mortality, but that the relationship may be causal."

NHS nurses typically said that they were unable to carry out a third of the tasks that they felt were necessary.

"We are not running with sufficient nurses to keep patients safe," Ms Ball said. "The fact that we are running with 30 per cent of care missed as a norm tells us that in the NHS we have not got enough registered nurses."

Her team looked at data on 423,000 patients in 300 hospitals across nine

countries, including 31 in the NHS, asking 27,000 nurses about 13 basic care tasks. On average, 1.6 per cent of patients died within 30 days of surgery and this was linked to how much care nurses said they did not have time to carry out. For every 1.3 tasks missed, death rates rose by 16 per cent, the report in the *International Journal of Nursing Studies* found.

"If you had a drug that was associated with a 16 per cent higher risk of death because of the way it was given, you would want to reduce that," Ms Ball said. "We are running with a level of risk that needn't be there. There are many places where care is compromised because there aren't enough nurses."

The findings have been seized upon by unions as nursing vacancy rates run at 10 per cent. Janet Davies, of the Royal College of Nursing, said: "This research puts beyond doubt that patients pay the highest price when the government permits nursing on the cheap."

"Ministers cannot ignore further evidence that the lack of registered nurses leads to people left in pain for longer and a higher risk of not recovering at all. Pressure is mounting, staff are pulled in every direction and important things are inevitably missed."

Ms Ball said that increases in NHS nurses in recent years had not kept pace with rising patient numbers. Concerns have been raised over a slump in applications for nursing degrees and a dip in EU arrivals since the Brexit vote.