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## Daily Reports

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### Daily Health Policy Report

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#### Coverage & Access | Nurses' Overtime Hours, Medical Error Linked, Report Indicates

[Jul 07, 2004]


Nurses who work shifts longer than 12 hours or who work unplanned overtime at the end of a shift are as much as three times more likely to make errors, such as giving patients incorrect medications or dosages, according to a study published Wednesday in the journal *Health Affairs*, the *Boston Globe* reports. In the study, researchers from the [University of Pennsylvania School of Nursing](#) surveyed 393 registered nurses in hospitals nationwide. During one month in 2002, the nurses kept a daily log of their shift lengths, overtime, break schedules, coffee intake, weariness driving home and number of errors or near-errors they committed. Nurses who worked at least 12.5 hours committed errors on 103 of 2,057 shifts or 5%, and reported near-errors -- defined as mistakes nurses caught before they affected patients -- on 97 shifts, the study found. Nurses working an average shift of between eight and 12 hours made errors on 12 out of 771 shifts, or 1.6%, and committed near-errors on 20 shifts, according to the study. The study found that 14% of nurses worked at least 16 continuous hours one or more times during the month, with the longest shift lasting 23 hours, 40 minutes.

#### Additional Findings

Researchers were "puzzle[ed]" to find that nurses who planned to work longer shifts and overtime reported fewer errors than those who worked unexpected overtime and those who worked an average length shift, the *Globe* reports. Ann Rogers, the study's lead author, suggested that nurses who planned to work longer shifts purposefully could get more sleep and go about their tasks in a calmer manner (Kowalczyk, *Boston Globe*, 7/7). About half of the nurses' errors involved medication; other errors included procedural mistakes (Heldt Powell, *Boston Herald*, 7/7). According to Rogers, nurses in the study commonly said, "I am trying to do too much. I triple-checked myself three times because I knew I was tired," or "it was a.m. and I wasn't concentrating." Rogers added, "That's a bad time for any human being to be awake."

### 'Epidemic' of Errors

There is a "growing concern" that the national shortage of nurses leading to an overstressed workload that can jeopardize patient care, the *Globe* reports. Some hospitals are "bending to nurses' demands on limiting longer shifts as the "epidemic of medical errors" becomes more apparent, the *Globe* reports (*Boston Globe*, 7/7). For example, Massachusetts and some other states are considering rules that would limit working hours for nurses. Julie Pinkham, executive director of the [Massachusetts Nurses Association](#), said of the study "When the data shows you're out there injuring patients, I don't think we can just let it go." However, some hospital administrators have said facilities should establish their own standards, rather than adopt state requirements (*Boston Herald*, 7/7). Researchers in the fall plan to release more reports from the study, including papers on nurses' caffeine consumption and whether nurses fall asleep while driving home from work (*Boston Globe*, 7/7).

 An abstract of the study is available [online](#).

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