

News Release

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Nurses Need Better Support in Public Health Emergencies

Ottawa – Significant gaps in support exist for nurses in the event of a public health emergency like a flu pandemic, a new study by the Women's Health Research Unit of the University of Ottawa demonstrates.

The study, *Caring for Nurses in Public Health Emergencies*, calls for greater support across Canada for emergency preparedness and response, including significant workplace improvements to better protect nurses in emergencies. A number of policy and program recommendations are identified to address emergency preparedness for nurses on the front line.

The recommendations address the need for increased access to training and drills, personal protective equipment, improved compensation and benefits for part-time "casual" employees, more effective communication of risks and risk management strategies, and the provision of supports to reduce work/life stress and conflicts for nurses, the majority of whom are women and family caregivers.

"The weaknesses and gaps in human resource support identified in our research jeopardize the capacity of Canada's health care system in terms to prepare, respond and recover from infectious disease outbreaks and other crises," says lead researcher Dr. Carol Amaratunga of the University of Ottawa. "Strengthening resources and support would also enhance public health and safety."

Recent public health disasters in Canada such as the 2003 SARS outbreak in Toronto and Vancouver, the Walkerton water contamination event, extreme weather and climate change related emergencies such as flooding, forest fires and hurricanes, as well as acts of terrorism worldwide, demonstrate the need to invest in crisis mitigation infrastructure and services and to put comprehensive preparedness, response and recovery plans in place.

A great deal has been accomplished by federal, provincial and local organizations since the SARS outbreaks. Improvements have been made in emergency preparedness with investments in stockpiles of antiviral medications, personal protective equipment, establishment of mobile hospital emergency response teams and the development of organizational disaster plans.

"In spite of these improvements, more attention needs to be given to preparing and supporting nurses and other health care professionals," says Dr. Ron Saunders, Vice-President, Research of Canadian Policy Research Networks. "If Canada is to respond effectively to the next public health emergency, we need to act now to develop and implement better programs and policies that address the needs of nurses."

There is need for additional resources to increase capacity, training, testing and implementing emergency plans, including the purchase of personal protective equipment so that nurses throughout Canada's health care system are fully supported in emergency situations like pandemic influenza. With resources and budgets being stretched, addressing emergency planning and preparedness is currently more challenging for health centre managers and front line workers such as nurses.

The study began in 2004. It included five focus groups across Canada, a national survey of more than 1,500 emergency and critical care nurses; a critical gap analysis of several emergency plans at federal, provincial, municipal and institutional levels; a sex- and gender-based analysis of personnel policy related to support mechanisms for public health care workers; a review of the literature on health care workers as first responders in public health emergencies and a national policy forum held on December 12, 2007.

Defence Research and Development Canada, Department of National Defence, funded the study, published by Canadian Policy Research Networks (CPRN). Other partners include Health Canada, the Victorian Order of Nurses, the Canadian Women's Health Network, and the Canadian Federation of Nurses Unions.

To read or download a copy of ***Caring for Nurses in Public Health Emergencies***, please go to www.cprn.org.

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