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TIME TO HEAL THE NURSING ISSUE

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For too long our state's health care system has been embroiled in a battle

over mandated nurse staffing ratios. The Massachusetts Nurses Association

wants the state to determine the maximum number of patients assigned to a

registered nurse per shift. The Association argues that patient safety is at

risk without state mandated staff ratios. Conversely, hospitals and other

providers say staffing decisions should continue to reside with their care

managers based on each patient's needs, and that ``arbitrary'' ratios will

result in service cutbacks that will, in turn, harm patient safety.

This prolonged debate needs to end for the very reason both sides cite - the

care and safety of patients. Patients need to know that disagreements will

not affect the system on which they rely for professional health care

in a safe, caring environment.

The Legislature has before it a reasonable and equitable solution to this

controversy, "An Act to Support the Nursing Profession and Promote Safe

Patient Care." This bill offers a more comprehensive solution to the nurse

shortage than staffing ratios alone and includes the steps needed to develop

a sufficient supply of nurses.

The bill addresses three main issues - bolstering the state's nursing work

force, creating an open and "transparent" procedure to hold hospitals

accountable for making their nurse staffing plans available to the public,

and instituting a series of nurse-sensitive performance measures to allow

the state to monitor how hospitals are meeting national standards of care.

The bill does not specify exactly how many nurses are needed to staff

individual floors of hospitals. No testimony or scientific study that I have

encountered in six years as Senate Chairman of the Health Care Committee leads me to believe that staffing ratios improve patient safety. However, we are in the midst of a nursing shortage and need to address the disease - not just the symptoms. We need to attract more nurses to ease the stressful burden on nursing personnel. The work force element of the legislation coordinates existing and proposed programs to address the spiraling nurse shortage. The proposal provides loan repayments and financial aid to new nurses who agree to work in Massachusetts health care institutions. In addition, it invigorates the Massachusetts Center for Nursing, a collaborative organization of nurses and state government, to facilitate its operation as a central clearinghouse for issues surrounding recruitment and retention of nurses. The legislation also calls for a greater collaboration between the health care and education sectors to address a key factor of the nursing shortage - the lack of nursing faculty that has caused thousands of potential nurses to be turned away from understaffed nursing programs or programs that are being phased out. The public deserves to know how hospitals are addressing the nurse staffing debate. The solution is accountability from hospitals, which will be mandated to file a description of their staffing plans with the state. They'll report on what combination of RNs, LPNs, assistive personnel, technology, and other resources they use on each unit for each shift. Hospitals will then solicit input from nurses and other members of the patient support team in creating that plan. Finally, the quality and safety of patient care associated with the nursing profession requires innovative monitoring and evaluation. National studies show that certain outcomes - such as urinary tract infections or bedsores - can be caused by insufficient nursing care. Performance measures will allow us to cut through the rhetoric to develop a set of "best practices" to guide hospital and nurses in the care of patients. Hospitals that fail to provide and implement staffing plans will be subject to penalties that would be paid

to the state and used to improve patient safety. This legislation is not a criticism of existing care provided in Massachusetts hospitals, which lead the globe in medical and health care advances. Nor does it slight the nurses association, whose passion on the staffing bill has drawn public attention to the important work force issues besetting that system. Nurses are the backbone of the health care delivery system. We need to strengthen our corps of dedicated health care professionals and, in doing so, strengthen their shared and unwavering commitment to the health and well-being of the patients they serve.

Caption:

GABRIEL POLONSKY ILLUSTRATIONPHOTO

Memo:RICHARD T. MOORE

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