

THE STAFFING CRISIS FOR HEALTH PROFESSIONALS:

PERSPECTIVES FROM RADIOLOGY TECHNOLOGISTS,
RESPIRATORY THERAPISTS, AND CERTIFIED
NURSING ASSISTANTS

AN OPINION RESEARCH STUDY CONDUCTED BY
PETER D. HART RESEARCH ASSOCIATES
ON BEHALF OF
AFT HEALTHCARE



A Union of Professionals

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INTRODUCTION

It is now widely understood that the nation faces a serious shortage of nurses. The depth and breadth of that problem were well documented in a March, 2001 survey of patient care nurses conducted by Peter D. Hart Research Associates for AFT Healthcare. In that survey 89% of nurses reported a nurse shortage in their area, seven in ten said that their facility had a major or moderate problem retaining (70%) and recruiting (69%) qualified nurses, and fully 54% said that within the previous two years they had considered leaving the patient care field for reasons other than retirement.

Now a new Hart Research study commissioned by AFT Healthcare finds that the nurse shortage is part of an even larger crisis: a serious shortage of essential health care professionals. Parallel surveys were conducted among three groups of health professionals: respiratory therapists, radiology technologists, and certified nursing assistants (CNAs). While each group of professionals of course has a distinct perspective, what unites them is their perception of a serious staffing crisis in their field. These are the surveys' key findings:

- 1) All three groups of professionals express low satisfaction with current conditions for health professionals, and point to inadequate staffing as the number one problem they face.**

- 2) Professionals report that staffing shortages are compromising the quality of health care provided, and even putting patients at risk.**

- 3) Beyond the staffing problems in their own facility, professionals perceive a broader shortage of qualified professionals in their fields, caused by unsatisfactory working conditions. Indeed, inadequate staffing has itself become a cause of recruitment and retention problems.**

4) The solutions to these shortages identified by professionals include mandatory maximum professional-to-patient ratios, higher pay, improved health coverage, more support staff, opportunities for continuing education, and a stronger voice on the job.

This report is divided into two sections. Section one outlines the staffing problem as it impacts health professionals every day in their facility, including the deleterious affect on patients and health care quality. The second section explores the larger issue of the shortage of essential health professionals, the causes of these shortages, and possible remedies for the retention and recruitment challenges faced by hospitals and other health care employers.

THE VIEW FROM THE GROUND: THE STAFFING CRISIS FACING HEALTH PROFESSIONALS

Health professionals paint a rather gloomy picture in describing the conditions they face today. Only about one-half of respiratory therapists (53%), radiology techs (53%), and CNAs (50%) are very or fairly satisfied with the conditions facing people in their profession today. Similarly, they report low morale among their fellow professionals. Just 38% of therapists say morale is excellent or good, while 62% say fair or poor (radiology techs: 49% fair/poor; CNAs: 45% fair/poor). Moreover, these professionals are more likely to feel that conditions for health professionals are getting worse than to perceive improvement: therapists (15% better, 56% worse), radiology techs (24% better, 47% worse), CNAs (26% better, 31% worse).

Respiratory therapists: Those in large hospitals (over 250 beds) are less satisfied with conditions and report lower morale than those in smaller hospitals.

Radiology techs: Morale is disproportionately low for those working in hospitals, and lower still for those in large hospitals.

CNAs: 62% of those who see 12 or fewer patients per day report good or excellent morale, compared to 44% among those who see 13 or more patients per day.

A number of factors contribute to this bleak outlook, including concerns about compensation, benefits, and voice on the job (discussed in section two). However, the single most important problem facing health professionals is *inadequate staffing levels*. As the following table shows, all three groups report that understaffing is the number one problem they face. Many also point to not having enough time to spend with patients and job-related stress, both of which are closely linked to the staffing problem.

Inadequate Staffing Is #1 Problem

What are the two biggest problems for [your profession] today?

Respiratory Therapists	Radiology Techs	CNAs
Staffing 49%	Staffing 41%	Staffing 46%
Time with patients 36%	Pay, benefits 27%	Pay, benefits 46%
Pay, benefits 22%	Workload 24%	Time with patients 45%
Advancement opptys 14%	Time with patients 22%	Advancement opptys 9%
Autonomy 12%	Job-related stress 22%	Scheduling 6%
Delegation of duties 8%	Physical work 8%	Asked to perform duties not trained for 6%
Scheduling 7%	Unsafe conditions 1%	Time for breaks 5%
Time for breaks 6%		Autonomy 5%

Only a minority in all three groups report that they are very or fairly satisfied with staffing levels at their facility, while a majority of therapists (63%), radiology techs (52%), and CNAs (57%) say they are just somewhat or not satisfied. For respiratory therapists, this is the lowest level of satisfaction recorded among fifteen different aspects of their job.

Respiratory therapists: 74% in large hospitals, and 67% of those who see thirteen or more patients per day, express low satisfaction with staffing levels.

Radiology techs: Just 38% of techs in hospitals are satisfied with staffing levels (vs. 59% for other techs).

The staffing crisis is a function of two powerful factors working together. First, professionals are simply being called upon to serve more patients. Majorities of both respiratory therapists (72%) and radiology techs (69%) report that their patient load has increased in the last couple of years, while among CNAs a significant 35% minority say their patient load has increased. Virtually no one says their patient load has decreased over that time. Fully two-thirds of respiratory therapists say they see more than twelve patients per day, and 57% of radiology techs see twenty or more patients.

Greatly magnifying the impact of this increasing ratio of patients to professionals is the increasing acuity or sickness of their patients. As a result of managed care and other patients, the average patient today is much sicker, and needs more care, than in the past. A majority of respiratory therapists (73%) and radiology techs (51%), as well as a 47% plurality of CNAs working in hospitals, say that the acuity of their patients has increased over the past few years.

In addition to the shared experience of inadequate staffing, these three groups are also united when it comes to what they enjoy about their work as health care professionals. Overwhelmingly, therapists (71%), CNAs (81%), and radiology techs (62%) point to “helping patients and their families” as the aspect of their job that brings them the greatest satisfaction. All three groups also cite challenging and interesting work and the opportunity to work with colleagues they like as important benefits. However, their primary motivation is clearly service to patients and families.

The Goal: Serving Patients/Families

What do you enjoy most about [your profession]?

	<u>Respiratory therapists</u>	<u>Radiology techs</u>	<u>CNAs</u>
Help patients & their families	71%	62%	81%
Challenging/interesting work	25%	27%	17%
Work closely with people I like	20%	25%	33%
Professional autonomy	17%	11%	2%
Continuously learning	8%	7%	19%
Good salary and benefits	7%	13%	5%

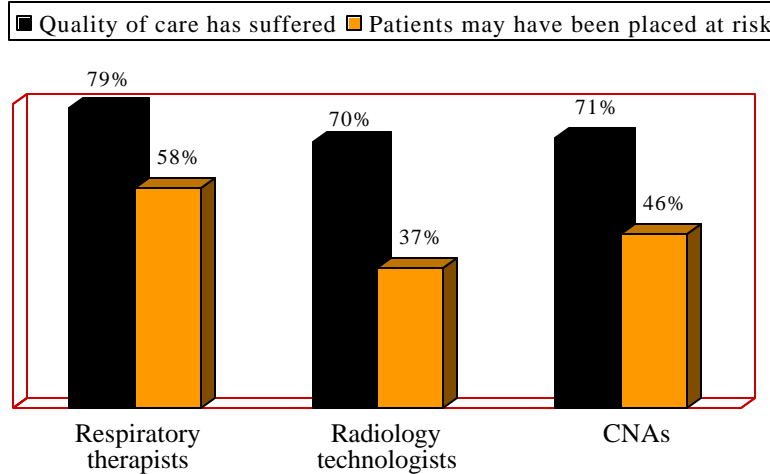
Unfortunately, their ability to provide that service appears to be compromised by inadequate staffing levels. One immediate and important effect of staffing shortages is that professionals have less time to spend with patients. Respiratory therapists (58%) and CNAs (60%) both say this is a very or fairly serious problem for them. (Direct patient contact is less relevant for radiology techs.) Indeed, CNAs consider their inability to spend time with patients to be as serious a problem as low pay or inadequate staffing, while therapists rank it second only to staffing.

Respiratory therapists: 66% in large hospitals, and 64% of those with more than twelve patients, say not having enough time to spend with patients is a problem.

Of even greater concern, a majority of professionals in all three fields say that, as a result of poor staffing and increased workloads, *the quality of care patients receive has suffered*. Seven in ten CNAs (71%), 79% of respiratory therapists, and 70% of radiology techs report a negative impact on the quality of patient care. Moreover, substantial proportions in all three professions report that *patients may have been placed at risk as a result of staffing shortfalls* (respiratory therapists 58%, CNAs 46%, radiology techs 37%).

The Consequence: Quality Of Care Suffers, Patients At Risk

As a result of increased workload/poor staffing [in my profession]:



Respiratory therapists: In large hospitals, 86% report an adverse impact on quality of care, and 67% say patients have been placed at risk; for those with more than 12 patients, 85% report an adverse impact on quality of care, and 61% say patients have been placed at risk.

CNAs: Of those with 13 or more patients, 80% say quality of care has been compromised and 60% report patients may have been placed at risk.

Radiology techs: 72% of those in hospitals say staffing has hurt quality of patient care.

The bottom line for health professionals: on a day-to-day basis, inadequate staffing is preventing them from providing the kind of quality care to which they are committed. In the second part of this report we explore professionals' views regarding the larger problem of a shortage of qualified professionals, as well as the causes of and some possible solutions to that shortage.

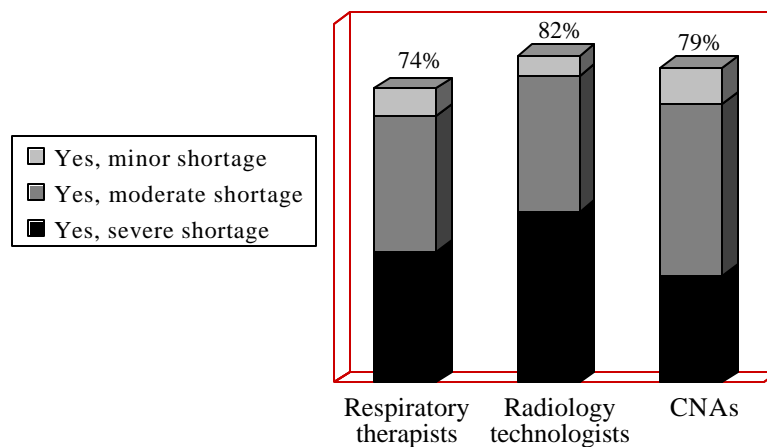
THE LARGER CHALLENGE: A SHORTAGE OF QUALIFIED HEALTH PROFESSIONALS

Health professionals' experience the staffing crisis directly and personally. Every day, it reduces the quality of their worklives and constrains their ability to deliver quality health care. Yet given these results, it is clearly not a problem limited to certain facilities, professions, or regions. There is a shortage of qualified professionals in all of these fields, and those in the field clearly recognize it.

Three-fourths of respiratory therapists report that there is a shortage of therapists in the area in which they live, including two-thirds who say the shortage is severe (33%). Among CNAs, 79% report a shortage in their area, with 27% describing it as severe. The worst shortage appears to be in radiology, with 82% perceiving a shortage and fully 43% a severe shortage. Clearly, the health care system faces a widespread crisis in terms of hiring an adequate number of professionals to meet the needs of patients.

Shortage Of Health Professionals

Is there a shortage of [people in your profession] where you live?



A shortage can of course reflect problems with recruitment, retention, or both. It appears that both factors are at work in all three fields, but with notable differences. Radiology techs report that retaining qualified techs is a problem (44% say major or moderate problem), but consider recruitment to be the greater problem (64%). Similarly, respiratory therapists perceive a greater recruitment challenge (66%) than retention problem (44%). For CNAs the situation is reversed: 46% report a problem recruiting qualified CNAs, but 59% see a retention problem. The fact that fully 29% of the CNAs have been working in the field for four years or less – compared to 6% of the respiratory therapists and less than 1% of the radiology techs – also suggests that high turnover is a problem in the CNA ranks.

The survey helps to shed some light on the underlying cause of these retention and recruitment problems by exploring the job satisfaction of health professionals. We saw in part one that all three groups express rather low levels of satisfaction and report poor morale among their professional peers. Clearly, those are not factors conducive either to successful recruitment or to retaining the services of qualified professionals.

There are particular aspects of professionals' work situation with which they express particularly strong dissatisfaction, and which therefore are likely to play important factors in causing professional shortages. As the following table reveals, these three groups of professionals express low levels of satisfaction with regard to a number of critical issues. Clearly, there are serious compensation concerns: professionals are not satisfied with salaries or – ironically enough – their own health care coverage and costs. A rather lukewarm endorsement of retirement benefits is also offered by CNAs (42% satisfied), respiratory therapists (47%), and radiology techs (53%).

Low Satisfaction With Key Conditions

I am very/fairly satisfied with this aspect of my job:

	<u>Respiratory therapists</u>	<u>Radiology techs</u>	<u>CNAs</u>
Salaries	48%	47%	31%
Workload	46%	56%	42%
Health coverage/costs	41%	46%	38%
Job-related stress	39%	39%	46%
Staffing levels	36%	46%	42%

In addition to compensation, professionals clearly see a need for improvement when it comes to workload, job-related stress, and (of course) staffing levels. These three factors are all inter-related: inadequate staffing levels create unreasonable workloads which in turn produces high levels of stress. What seems to have developed in the health care industry is a kind of *vicious cycle*: understaffing creates intolerable working conditions (workload and stress), which creates recruitment and retention problems, which in turn intensifies the staffing problems. The professional shortage has thus become a self-reinforcing problem, as many talented people will not easily be persuaded to work under conditions of severe understaffing.

Respiratory therapists: just 28% in large hospitals are satisfied with level of on-the-job stress, and only 37% are satisfied with their workload levels.

Radiology techs: those in hospitals express especially low satisfaction with workload (49%) and stress (37%).

However, this does not mean there is no remedy to the problem. Despite professionals' concerns about conditions, the research suggests there are ways to improve recruitment and retention. One step endorsed by both respiratory

therapists and CNAs is establishing mandatory maximum patient-to-professional ratios (this idea is not relevant for radiology techs).

By an overwhelming margin, CNAs (88% to 7%) favor mandatory ratios. For CNAs in a hospital medical or surgical unit, the median suggested ratio is about 6:1. Fully 71% suggest a mandatory ratio of no more than 8:1. This stands in stark contrast to the current reality in hospitals, where fully 60% of CNAs say they currently care for more than 8 patients at a time. In an intensive-care unit, most CNAs would set the limit at 4:1 or less. In nursing homes, the median recommended patient-CNA ratio is between 7:1 and 8:1, and 87% say the ratio should be 10:1 or less. Again, current practice is clearly quite different: more than six in ten (63%) nursing home CNAs report that they care for more than 10 patients during their shift.

Respiratory therapists also embrace the idea of mandatory ratios (67% to 23%). The median recommended ratio for a hospital medical or surgical unit is approximately 10:1, with 63% saying the ratio should be 12:1 or lower. However, two-thirds of therapists (67%) report that they now see more than 12 patients per day.

Health professionals also support a range of other steps as effective solutions to the recruitment and retention challenges facing their professions. Improving compensation packages ranks very high on professionals' list of priorities. More than 85% in all three professions say that raising salaries would be a very or fairly effective way to better recruit and retain quality professionals. More than 70% say the same thing about improving health coverage.

But professionals are looking for more than fair salaries and good benefits. They also point to such reforms as giving professionals more input in decisions affecting the workplace, hiring of more support staff, providing opportunities for continuing education, and more flexible schedules as important steps to take. Improving staffing ratios is itself considered to be an effective step for improving retention and recruitment by CNAs (91%), radiology techs (68%), and respiratory therapists (78%). This step would reverse the "vicious cycle" of inadequate staffing leading to a

worsening shortage of professionals, and replace it with a virtuous cycle of improved staffing, better conditions, and more successful recruitment.

Effective Solutions For Retention And Recruitment

*This would be a very/fairly effective way to improve
recruitment/retention of [people in my profession]:*

	<u>Respiratory therapists</u>	<u>Radiology techs</u>	<u>CNAs</u>
Raise salaries	86%	86%	91%
Improve staffing ratios	78%	68%	91%
Better health coverage	74%	71%	78%
More input in decisions	74%	66%	76%
Flexible schedules	60%	70%	70%
Support staff	57%	63%	75%
Continuing education	57%	69%	76%

These findings are important because they indicate that, although the professional shortage is clearly a serious problem, it is not an unsolvable one. If hospitals and other health care providers will improve conditions for health professionals, these survey results suggest that it is possible to make real progress in providing Americans with the quality professional health care that they need and deserve.

METHODOLOGY

The study includes findings from the following three surveys:

A national survey of respiratory therapists. A national telephone survey was conducted among 308 respiratory therapists. Interviews were conducted on March 18, 2002, and the average interview length was approximately 15 minutes. The margin of error for this survey is +5.7%. This study was conducted among licensed respiratory therapists utilizing a sample purchased from PCS List and Information Technologies of Peabody, MA. The sample of 6,000 records was created by an Nth select from a

national database of 60,000. The company's database of home addresses was compiled from State Licensing Bureaus and Registries, and are updated quarterly. The purchased sample was then sent to TELEMATCH for telephone number appending. This list was then sorted by zipcode and segmented into 300 equal clusters of names. From each cluster, a single person was interviewed, providing a random selection process, and guaranteeing that each person on the list had a equal chance of being called.

A national survey of radiology technologists. A national telephone survey was conducted among 302 radiology techs. Interviews were conducted on March 19, 2002, and the average interview length was approximately 15 minutes. The margin of error for this survey is +5.7%. This study was conducted among licensed radiologic/xray technicians utilizing a sample purchased from PCS List and Information Technologies of Peabody, MA. The sample of 6,500 records was created by an Nth select from a national database of 335,944. The company's database of home addresses was compiled from State Licensing Bureaus and Registries, and are updated quarterly. The purchased sample was then sent to TELEMATCH for telephone number appending. This list was then sorted by zipcode and segmented into 300 equal clusters of names. From each cluster, a single person was interviewed, providing a random selection process, and guaranteeing that each person on the list had a equal chance of being called.

A survey of certified nursing assistants (CNAs) in states that register CNAs. A telephone survey was conducted among 302 respiratory therapists. Interviews were conducted on March 18, 2002, and the average interview length was approximately 15 minutes. The margin of error for this survey is +5.7%. This study was conducted among certified nursing assistants utilizing a sample purchased from PCS List and Information Technologies of Peabody, MA. The sample of 9,000 records was created by an Nth select from a national database of 1,097,200. The company's database of home addresses was compiled from State Licensing Bureaus and Registries, and are updated quarterly. The purchased sample was then sent to TELEMATCH for telephone number appending. This list was then sorted by zipcode and segmented

into 300 equal clusters of names. From each cluster, a single person was interviewed, providing a random selection process, and guaranteeing that each person on the list had a equal chance of being called.



A Union of Professionals

American Federation of Teachers, AFL-CIO
555 New Jersey Ave. N.W. • Washington, DC 20001
202/879-4400 • www.aft.org

