Mixed reviews for 12-hour OR shifts

Perioperative managers and directors give 12-hour shifts mixed reviews. Two-thirds responding to an online survey by OR Manager say they use these extended shifts. On the plus side, they say the shifts help in covering off shifts and weekends and aid recruitment and retention. Negatives include juggling a mix of shifts and filling the gap if a 12-hour person is off. A number expressed misgivings about fatigue and patient safety.

A few—7 of the 272 respondents—said fatigue from 12-hour shifts was linked to an error at their facility. Examples were a wrong-site surgery, a retained object, and medication errors. In the wrong-site surgery case, the “RN blamed a long shift for her being too tired to complete the patient safety checklist/timeout,” one person wrote.

In interviews, managers said doing away with 12-hour shifts, as 2 nurse researchers advocate in the related article, would be unpopular with the staff at a time when recruitment and retention are a priority. They say they strive to balance the department’s needs with those of the staff, keeping in mind risks of fatigue to patients and nurses.

The upside of 12-hour shifts

“If I took away 12-hour shifts, nurses here would be unhappy,” says Mary Diamond, RN, MBA, CNOR. “Out of 14 days, you work 6 and get 8 days off. It’s nice if you want your time off to really be time off.” She is director of surgical services at TriCity Medical Center, Oceanside, California, which has 12 ORs.

Diamond says she has shared with the staff the research on the risks of 12-hour shifts and is cautious in scheduling.

“With overtime, we don’t like the staff to work more than 4 hours beyond their 8 hours,” she says. She is also careful that nurses who work 12-hour shifts aren’t scheduled for much call.

She asks nurses to be honest about their fatigue and ability to withstand 12-hour duty.

Under California law, nurses who work 12-hour shifts are entitled to 3 rest breaks and 2 meal breaks, though they can waive the second meal break. Any work past 12 hours must be paid double time.

The disadvantage is that 12-hour nurses are only available 3 days a week. Diamond notes, “You have to balance it so you don’t have a lot who work Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday and are off Thursday and Friday.”

Accommodating nurses’ needs

At St Luke’s Boise Medical Center in Idaho, which has 17 ORs and is staffed around the clock, 12-hour shifts are one option offered.

“It’s definitely a staff satisfaction factor. It also makes the week simpler to
cover,” says Jody Hughes, RN, who schedules the staff.

The 12-hour shifts help leaders accommodate needs of RNs as their lives and family needs change, a consideration in an area where there is not a large pool of RNs to draw from.

Hughes weighs needs of the department with those of individual nurses. Some prefer to work 12 hours on 3 consecutive days, such as Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday of one week and Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday of the next, with 6 days off in between. Others find consecutive shifts too demanding and might work 12 hours on Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday.

Hughes also helps nurses ease off of 12-hour shifts if that no longer works for them. For older nurses, especially, going back to 8 or 10 hours can “put the spring back in their step,” she says.
Another challenge is finding a good match between the shifts nurses want to work and the surgical specialty. Those who want to work 12-hour days may be a good match for specialties with long cases. Nurses who work 8- or 10-hour days are more likely to be assigned to specialties with shorter cases. A nurse who changes shifts may face the tough decision of changing specialties.

**Keeping teams intact**

At the University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB), with more than 40 ORs, 12-hour shifts keep teams intact for surgeons and specialties whose cases run past 3 pm.

Plus, the longer shifts benefit the staff because “it allows them to have 2 days off during the week without affecting their benefit time,” says the OR’s clinical coordinator, Sandra Daily, RN, BSN. They can schedule doctor and dentist appointments without using leave time.

She adds that most nurses tell her they feel no more tired after 3 12-hour days than after a regular week of 5 8-hour shifts. Plus, at 3 pm, a nurse can find it hard to leave on time.

UAB can often match the shift to a nurse’s preferences.

Weekends are staffed using the Baylor Plan, in which nurses work 2 12-hour shifts and are paid for 36 hours, a schedule that “is very appealing for nurses with young children,” Daily says.

Particularly for young nurses, offering a variety of shifts gives a hospital an edge in recruitment and retention, notes Barbara Doster, RN, MBA, administrative director of perioperative services.

**A win-win-win**

Twelve-hour shifts can work well for weekends in large hospitals, notes Kathleen Miller, RN, MSHA, CNOR, of PeriopRx Consultants, Gilbert, Arizona. The shifts start at 7 pm Friday and end at 7 am Monday.

Using 12-hour shifts on the weekends keeps the primary staff working Monday through Friday on their designated specialty teams rather than having to rotate to weekends.

“That makes the physicians happy because they pretty much have the same staff Monday through Friday, and that makes their days much more efficient,” she says. Weekend teams also become more efficient at the types of cases they typically do.

“It’s a win-win-win situation for managers, surgeons, and staff,” says Miller, noting the arrangement worked well for a large health system where she previously worked.

**The downside for staffing**

Enthusiasm for 12-hour shifts is not unanimous.

“The downside from a staffing viewpoint is there is less flexibility because (12-hour nurses) only work 3 days, and you have to cover the other days as well,” says Renae Battié, RN, MN, CNOR. She also points out that 12-hour nurses figure as 1 FTE even though they work only 72 hours rather than 80 in a 2-week pay period.

In the Franciscan Health System, where Battié is regional director of perioperative services, 12-hour shifts are used but not a great deal. The system has 5 hospitals in western Washington State.

Battié is also concerned about the research related to how productive and safe a person is after 8 hours of work, while acknowledging the plus
Pluses, minuses of 12-hour shifts

In OR Manager’s online survey, some 150 participants took time to comment on the positives and negatives of 12-hour shifts. Here are examples.

The positives
Among comments on the positive aspects:
• “It helps prevent mandatory overtime as well as covering off-shifts and weekends. It also contributes to staff retention and ultimately staff satisfaction.”
• “It enables later shift coverage to get add-ons done as well as some like the work balance.”
• “We cut overtime by almost 1,000 hours the first year we started 12-hour shifts.”
• “Yes, if they are scheduled appropriately, and you ensure that the staff get adequate breaks during the shift.”
• “We use an 11a to 11p shift to cover evenings. The staff like the 3-day work week, and it gives us lunch break help for the day shift. We also use a weekend plan that is 7a to 7p. This helps the staff to not have as many weekend rotations and on-call commitments.”

Tough to make it work
Others cited negative effects:
• “It is difficult to have the right number of staff doing 12-hour shifts. The right mix of 12, 10, and 8-hour shifts is difficult, and we recently went back to all 8-hour shifts due to short staffing.”
• “Managing productivity is problematic if the case volume slows after 3 pm. Staff resent having to go home early if it happens often.”
• “Many that said they wanted it were exhausted—3 consecutive shifts is too much! Then there is call to consider. Negative impact has caused me to change the schedule.”
• “It is not always easy to make these schedules work; some staff prefer 3 days in a row; some like them with a day in between. When a staff member calls off, it is a significant amount of time to try to accommodate and backfill—if you can backfill at all.”
• “When the shifts are all scheduled consecutively without a day off in between, staff are tired and more prone to be cranky or make errors. We have started a policy that they can’t work more than 2 12-hour shifts in a row. (The exception is weekend staff who are long-term employees and would lose their weekend pay plan differential.)”
• “Patient safety concerns. Many staff work in 2 places, and 12-hours shifts allow more hours in their second job.”

The survey was posted in July 2010. The majority of respondents (69%) were from community hospitals, and 65% manage 10 or more ORs.