CNA to hold town hall meetings on nurse ratio proposal

The California Nurses Association is holding a series of town hall meetings to "rally nurses and gain public support" for a new law requiring minimum nurse-to-patient ratios beginning in 2002, the *San Jose Mercury News* reports (Feder, *San Jose Mercury News,* January 6, 2001). Nurses will discuss the law, which was sponsored by the CNA, in 21 sessions held around the state. The meetings will likely serve as a "key public relations and mobilizing tool" for the 32,000-member union as a "behind-the-scenes battle intensifies between nurses and hospitals over which staffing ratios the state should adopt," the *Mercury News* reports.

CNA spokesperson Charles Idelson said, "We want to engage in a public discourse about current nursing care conditions and what is clearly a nursing-care crisis in California. We believe that the ratios—presuming they are strong and effective—will have a dramatic impact on patient safety and restore an adequate number of nurses to hospitals."

With the state Department of Health Services expected to issue the proposed ratios in a few months, the debate between hospitals and nurses over the issue continues to intensify. Pushing for higher nurse-to-patient ratios, the CNA "contends" that hospital-proposed ratios are "watered down" and would "compromise patient care and drive frustrated nurses away from hospitals in the midst of a protracted statewide shortage." But Jan Emerson, a spokesperson for the hospital lobbying group California Healthcare Association, said that the hospitals' proposals are meant to be supplemented with additional staff based on "how sick patients are." Emerson said, "We're starting totally from scratch trying to figure out how to best do this. You cannot legislate in stone a specific number of nurses that's applicable at all times." For more information about the CNA town hall meetings, go to www.calnurse.org/cna/pdf/TownHall.pdf.

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Spider venom may prevent atrial fibrillation

Roger Dobson Abergavenny, Wales

Venom from a common South American tarantula spider may contain a protein that could prevent atrial fibrillation.

Research based on rabbits suggests that the peptide GsMtx-4 found in the poison of 1 of the 800 different types of tarantula may be useful in tackling the cause of rapid and chaotic electrical activity in the atria.

In the research, reported in *Nature* (2001; 409:35-36), a team of US and German scientists investigated what kind of insect venom would block ion channels and prevent cells from swelling and triggering atrial fibrillation.

The team, led by Professor Frederick Sachs of the State University of New York at Buffalo, tried the venom from a number of spiders before finding that the poison from the Chilean *Grammostola spatulata* (or *Grammostola rosea*) tarantula worked, with the peptide GsMtx-4 as the active ingredient.

In the research, the team triggered the hearts of the rabbits into arrhythmia with a jolt of electricity and then used extracts of the venom to suppress the abnormal heart rhythm that followed.

The research results also show that the peptide has no effect on an unstretched, or normal, heart, suggesting that side effects should be minimal. An additional safety factor is that the bite of the Chilean tarantula from which the venom comes is not harmful to humans.

Professor Sachs and his colleagues said that the protein looks promising and that it may herald a new class of compounds that could be targeted at treating the causes, rather than the symptoms, of atrial fibrillation. Hopes are that the research could eventually lead to early treatment of this potentially serious condition before it causes heart failure and stroke. The next step, however, is likely to be further safety tests on animals to see if the protein has any undesirable effects on other parts of the body.

According to the American Tarantula Society, *G spatulata* is harmless, docile, easy to care for, and an ideal first pet. It comes in 2 colors, brown or frosted red, and can go for as long as a year without eating.

Troy Bartlett

Tarantulas: the perfect pet?