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SPAN OF CONTROL
BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

In nursing, the first-line manager fills one of the most critical roles in the administration of nursing services. For any manager to perform her/his responsibilities effectively an optimal span of control is necessary. Span of control refers to the number of people reporting to one manager and can be measured by the number of full-time equivalents under the jurisdiction of a manager. It is an important management concept, because it determines the structure of an organization and has financial, human resource and quality of care implications. Approximately 10 research studies have been done on span of control issues since the early 1990s. The impetus of the studies in the 1990s was to help hospital management understand the 'most appropriate' span of control to better manage labor expenses during a time when cost control was being heavily emphasized and managed care's ever-growing influence in the healthcare arena.

Unfortunately, the majority of these studies have been specific to one or two hospitals, so the results are not generalizable to a large sample. Secondly, the downfall of many approaches in the past has been that researchers have tried to find the ideal span for all managers, rather than trying to analyze the factors that influence a given situation. This is particularly important in nursing because of the variety of services and levels of management that a nurse manager can be involved in. Third, no studies have examined the effect of span of control on patient safety and this is becoming a highly emphasized area in healthcare today. There was one study done in 2001 in an occupational setting that found an increase in unsafe behaviors and safety accidents when the span of control of supervisors was increased (Hechanova and Beehr, 2001).