A senior nurse who fought for mandatory minimum nurse patient ratios in the Australian state of Victoria has said the government’s decision not to do the same in England is dangerous.

Lisa Fitzpatrick, secretary of the Victorian branch of the Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation (ANMF), said without statutory ratios, patients’ lives would be at risk.

Earlier this month, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence issued draft guidelines on staffing in adult inpatient wards. They recommend that a nurse should not care for more than eight patients at one time.

Speaking in Liverpool at the Patient Safety Congress, a two-day event attended by healthcare professionals from around the world, Ms Fitzpatrick said the battle to keep ratios has continued, with consecutive state governments attempting to remove them. In 2011, for the first time in history, nurses walked out of hospital wards in protest. The government threatened nurses with jail and a $34,000 (£16,000) fine for each strike day. Ms Fitzpatrick said the NICE guidance will never be implemented without a legal obligation. ‘One to eight will become the maximum and that will be dangerous,’ she said.

‘We have struggled with this in Australia,’ she told her audience. ‘There are so many financial pressures on our public health services that if it is not mandated it simply will not happen.’

Professor Jill Maben, director of the National Nursing Research Unit at King’s College London, who also spoke at the conference, said: ‘Unfortunately this ratio is already being translated as a maximum and there are nurse directors across the UK who simply do not want to hear it because they are currently working with one-to-five or one-to-six ratios and fear if their finance directors get wind of that, they will be in a worse position than they are now.’

In the 13 years since the legislation was introduced in Australia, the state of Victoria has seen an increase of 10,800 nurses and midwives working in the public health system, more people being treated and a motivated nursing workforce that can deliver safe, reliable continuity of care, Ms Fitzpatrick said.