The Importance of Workplace Violence Prevention in Health Care Settings

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Physical and verbal violence against health care workers

"I've been bitten, kicked, punched, pushed, pinched, shoved, scratched, and spat upon," says Lisa Tenney, RN, of the Maryland Emergency Nurses Association. "I have been bullied and called very ugly names. I've had my life, the life of my unborn child, and of my other family members threatened, requiring security escort to my car."

Situations such as these describe some of the types of violence directed toward health care workers. Workplace violence is not merely the heinous, violent events that make the news; it is also the everyday occurrences, such as verbal abuse, that are often overlooked. While this Sentinel Event Alert focuses on physical and verbal violence, there is a whole spectrum of overlapping behaviors that undermine a culture of safety, addressed in Sentinel Event Alert issues 40 and 57. These types of behaviors will not be addressed in this alert. The focus of this alert is to help your organization recognize and acknowledge workplace violence directed at health care workers from patients and visitors, better prepare staff to handle violence, and more effectively address the aftermath.

What is workplace violence?

The CDC National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) defines workplace violence as "violent acts (including physical assaults and threats of assaults) directed toward persons at work or on duty." The U.S. Department of Labor defines workplace violence as an action (verbal, written, or physical aggression) which is intended to control or cause, or is capable of causing, death or serious bodily injury to oneself or others, or damage to property. Workplace violence includes abusive behavior toward authority, intimidating or harassing behavior, and threats. Each episode of violence or credible threat to health care workers warrants notification to leadership, to internal security and, as needed, to law enforcement, as well as the creation of an incident report, which can be used to analyze what happened and to inform actions that need to be taken to minimize risk in the future. Under The Joint Commission's Sentinel Event policy, rape, assault (leading to death, permanent harm, or severe temporary harm), or homicide of a patient, staff member, licensed independent practitioner, visitor, or vendor while on site at an organization is a sentinel event that warrants a comprehensive systematic analysis. While the policy does not include other forms of violence, it is up to every organization to specifically define acceptable and unacceptable behavior and the severity of harm that will trigger an investigation. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) defines workplace violence as "violent acts (including physical assaults and threats of assaults) directed toward persons at work or on duty." The U.S. Department of Labor defines workplace violence as an action (verbal, written, or physical aggression) which is intended to control or cause, or is capable of causing, death or serious bodily injury to oneself or others, or damage to property. Workplace violence includes abusive behavior toward authority, intimidating or harassing behavior, and threats.
Take a stand: No more violence to health care workers

Forms of violence to health care workers
- Biting
- Kicking
- Punching
- Pinching
- Shoving
- Scratching
- Spitting
- Name calling
- Intimidating
- Threatening
- Nothing
- Harassing
- Stalking
- Beating
- Choking
- Stabbing
- Killing

Statistics on violence against health care workers
- 35 percent of nurses report being physically assaulted by a patient or a patient's family member, and almost half reported being bullied (ANA)
- Workers in health care settings are four times more likely to be victimized than workers in private industry (BLS and Hazelton)
- Health care workers have a 20 percent higher chance of being the victim of workplace violence than other workers (National Direct Observation Survey)
- Violence incidents are four times more likely to cause health care workers to take time off from work than other kinds of injuries (BLS)

Violence against health care workers is grossly underreported

Only 30 percent of nurses report incidents of violence
- Only 26 percent of emergency department physicians report violent incidents

Health care workers
- Think that violence is “part of the job”
- Are sometimes uncertain what constitutes violence
- Often believe their assailants are not responsible for their actions due to conditions affecting their mental state

Factors associated with perpetrators of violence
- Altered mental status or mental illness
- Patients in police custody
- Long wait times or crowds
- Being given “bad news” about a diagnosis
- Drug activity
- Domestic disputes among patients or visitors
- Presence of firearms or other weapons

What to do when violence occurs
- Report it. Notify leadership, security and, if needed, law enforcement.
## Requirements Related to Workplace Violence

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### Joint Commission Requirements Related to Workplace Violence

#### Emergency Management
- EM.01.01.01 EP 2
- EM.01.01.01 EP 3
- EM.01.01.01 EP 4
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#### Leadership
- LD.03.01.01
- LD.04.01.01 EP 2
- LD.04.04.05

#### Provision of Care, Treatment, and Services
- PC.01.02.13 EP 6
- PC.03.05.03 EP 1

#### Rights and Responsibilities of the Individual
- RI.01.06.03 EP 1