

By Mark Noonan

National Nurses Week is celebrated beginning May 6th and ending on May 12th, the birthday of Florence Nightingale, the founder of modern nursing. In our May newsletter, we take a look at the current and growing situation of on-the-job violence with a focus on the threats of violence nurses and their employers are facing.

Violence Towards Nurses

Violent behavior crosses all boundaries – age, race, education, religion, and even the workplace. The violence against nurses and other health care workers, however, is increasing and becoming more severe.

In 2009, a survey conducted by the Emergency Nurses Association found that more than half of its 3,454 respondents had been hit, pushed, scratched, kicked, shoved or spit on while at work. The study also found that 67 percent of emergency nurses rated their perception of safety at a five or lower on a ten-point scale. One in three said they had considered leaving their job or nursing altogether because of the risks associated with violent behaviors. Reports of violence were highest among those that worked night shifts and on weekends.

Last fall, a psychiatric technician, Donna Gross, was strangled to death at Napa State Hospital in California. Only days later, also in California, Cynthia Palomata (a nurse for over 20 years) died after being hit with a lamp by an inmate at Contra Costa County's correctional facility. Instead of alarming statistics, it has sadly been these high media reports on attacks that have brought the issue into the public's eye.

As the public becomes more aware of the violence, calls to re-examine criminal penalties for assaults against nurses and other healthcare workers have come to light. Nursing associations across the country have responded to the increased violence and are seeking tougher criminal penalties for assaults against healthcare workers. Currently, laws that protect nurses vary widely by state with several states having no laws.

Recommendations to Reduce Violence

The latest figures from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) show that in 2008 there were 2,890 work-related assaults at hospitals. If that number isn't distressing enough, note that in order to be included in this total the assault had to inflict enough injury that the victim was forced to miss at least one day of work. Only police and correctional officers have a higher rate than nursing and medical professionals of on the job assaults.

To help reduce violence towards the healthcare profession and to assist employees who do become victims, the Emergency Nurses Association has released the following recommendations:

- Make sure the staff knows that the employer and senior administration are aware of the issues, and fully supports efforts to prevent violence.
- Develop a plan for preventing, mitigating, and responding to violence – for nurses, doctors, administrators, and security guards.
- Train workers to recognize signs of impending violence and provide them with ways to defuse volatile situations.
- Implement clear, consistent procedures for reporting violent incidents, and establish a culture of acceptance for reporting violence.
- Provide access to medical care and counseling for those who are victims.

In addition, employers can also implement safety measures recommended by The American College of Emergency Physicians. Their list of safety measures include such things as:

- 24-hour security guards;
- Bulletproof glass;
- Coded identity badges;
- Metal detectors; and
- "Panic buttons" for medical staff to push.

The Henry Ford Hospital in Detroit, Michigan, has experienced success with these recommendations. Within the first six months of implementation of their safety program, which was updated to include the installation of metal detectors, they confiscated a shocking number of weapons: 33 guns, 1,324 knives, and 97 pepper sprays.

Warning Signs

Workplace violence occurs across all job professions. According to the BLS, more than two million Americans are impacted by workplace violence each year. Many instances of workplace violence occur when employees act out against other employees. While every situation is unique, some warning signs that employers and employees should be aware of include:

- Excessive tardiness or absences
- Increased need for supervision

- Lack of performance
- Change in work habits
- Inability to concentrate
- Signs of stress
- Change in attitude
- Fascination with weapons
- Substance abuse problems
- Not taking responsibility for actions

Exhibiting one of the behaviors does not necessarily mean an employee is prone to an act of violence. But when someone's behavior has noticeably changed, when the behavior is constant, or when there is a combination of the two, it should be reported to management.

These are only a few possible warning signs that may alert employers to the possibility of a workplace violence incident. For more information, visit the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) website at <http://www.osha.gov/SLTC/workplaceviolence/>.

Workplace Violence Checklist

An employer should begin to implement a workplace violence program, or re-evaluate current procedures, by identifying risk for violence by department and/or work area. By analyzing workplace violence records, the employer can collect data on how many incidents have occurred, which job task was being performed, which workers were victimized (gender, age, job classification, etc.), and what type of incident occurred. This review will obtain data that tells the "who, what, when, where, and why" of the vulnerable work areas.

Employers should also conduct a walkthrough of the workplace. Take notice of hazards that would affect health and safety, and note security measures. Local police may also be able to assist with or conduct a security audit.

A simple survey of employees will also help employers identify potential workplace violence. What do the employees see as risk factors? Are current control measures working? How satisfied are they with their jobs? Seek ideas for improvements and prevention measures.

Next, employers can identify environmental risk factors for workplace violence. Are there crime patterns in the neighborhood that influence safety at work? Do the entrances and parking have ample lighting? Are security officers visible and available? Are fire/escape routes clearly marked? Are identification tags required for employees and visitors? Are there security monitors?

Another preventative step is to have employee and supervisor training. Put a violence prevention program in place. Train all employees on how to handle difficult patients. Remember to include the security staff, as it is equally important to train them on how to handle the specifics of the health care environment.

Although these guidelines are not a new OSHA standard or regulation, a complete checklist for helping prevent workplace violence for health care and social service workers can be found by visiting the OSHA website: www.osha.gov/Publications/OSHA3148/osh3148.html.

Next Step for Employers

"How very little can be done under the spirit of fear."

– Florence Nightingale

Taking preventative steps is essential for reducing fear and stopping workplace violence. Standards for workplace safety and security should not be lowered for any job profession. Workplace violence may come from many sources, from intruders to patients to angry co-workers, and in many forms, but any and all violence should be treated the same...with a zero-tolerance.

For More Information

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