

Violence Against Nurses Working in U.S. Emergency Departments

- Workplace violence is defined as any physical assault, emotional or verbal abuse or threatening, harassing or coercive behavior in the work setting that causes physical or emotional harm.
- More than half of emergency nurses surveyed report experiencing physical violence on the job, and one in four has been physically assaulted more than 20 times in the past three years.
- One in five emergency nurses reports having been verbally abused more than 200 times in the last three years.
- More than two in three emergency nurses (67 percent) in the study rated their perception of safety in the emergency department at five or lower on a ten point scale.
- Reports of violence were lowest among nurses in pediatric emergency departments and highest among nurses who work night and weekend shifts. Male emergency nurses were more likely than their female colleagues to report having experienced workplace violence.
- One in three emergency nurses in the study reports having considered leaving her or his department or emergency nursing altogether because of violence.
- Precipitating factors for physical or verbal assault include: patients or visitors under the influence of alcohol or illicit drugs; psychiatric patients being treated in the emergency department; crowding; prolonged wait times; and a shortage of emergency department nurses.
- Barriers to reporting violent incidents in the emergency department include: the perception that reporting violent incidents might have a negative effect on customer service reports or scores; ambiguous policies for reporting incidents; fear of retaliation by emergency department management, hospital administration, nursing staff or physicians; the perception that reporting incidents was a sign of incompetence or weakness; lack of physical injury as a result of an incident; the attitude that violence is to be expected; and lack of support from administration and management.

Recommendations:

- Ensuring that emergency department staff know that senior administration is aware of the issues and support efforts to prevent and mitigate violence.
- Encouraging nurse executives to take steps to make the department safe.
- Establishing a culture of acceptance for reporting violence incidents.
- Developing clear and consistent procedures for reporting violent incidents.

- Providing access to medical care and follow up counseling, as needed, for emergency department staff who are victims of workplace violence.
- Appointing an interdisciplinary task force to identify vulnerabilities in the emergency department and develop a plan for preventing, mitigating, responding to and reporting violence.

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