Workplace Violence

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INTRODUCTION

Workplace violence involves any act or threat of physical harm, harassment, intimidation, or other threatening disruptive behavior that occurs at the work site. It can range from threats and verbal abuse to physical assaults and even homicide.

Workplace violence is a recognized hazard in the healthcare industry. It can affect and involve employees, patients, vendors, and visitors.

As a healthcare employee, you must be aware of the risk of workplace violence and know what to do if you experience it – for your personal safety as well as the safety of patients and others at your facility.

PURPOSE/OVERALL GOAL

This module provides an overview of workplace violence in the healthcare setting. It includes information on prevalence, risk factors, prevention strategies, and safety advice for healthcare employees.

The goal of this module is to ensure that you understand the facts about workplace violence and what to do if you encounter it in the course of your work in the healthcare field.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

After completing this module, the learner should be able to:

1. Define the types of workplace violence that exist
2. Describe risk factors for violent behavior in a healthcare setting
3. Describe strategies to help prevent workplace violence
4. Define safety measures for healthcare workers to take
DEFINING WORKPLACE VIOLENCE

Workplace violence ranges from offensive or threatening language to homicide. The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) defines workplace violence as any act or threat of physical violence, harassment, intimidation, or other threatening disruptive behavior that occurs at the work site.

An estimated 2 million Americans experience some form of workplace violence each year:

- 60% of these incidents occur in healthcare facilities
- About 50% of emergency department workers are physically assaulted
- Between 97% and 100% of emergency department workers experience some form of verbal abuse

Examples of workplace violence include the following:

1. **Threats** – Expressions of intent to cause harm, such as:
   - Verbal threats
   - Threatening body language
   - Written threats

2. **Bullying** – Verbal abuse that:
   - Isolates the victim from others
   - Interferes with the victim’s work
   - Sometimes attacks the victim’s credibility

3. **Physical assaults** – Attacks that include:
   - Slapping or hitting
   - Rape
   - Homicide
   - Use of weapons such as firearms, bombs, knives

4. **Muggings** – Aggravated assaults, usually conducted by surprise and with intent to rob
RISK FACTORS FOR WORKPLACE VIOLENCE

Although anyone working in a healthcare facility may become a victim of violence, nurses and aides who have the most direct contact with patients are at higher risk.

Other healthcare personnel at increased risk of violence include:
- Emergency response personnel
- Hospital safety officers
- All healthcare providers

Violence may occur anywhere in a healthcare facility, but it is most frequent in the following areas:
- Psychiatric units
- Emergency departments
- Waiting rooms
- Skilled nursing facilities
EFFECTS OF WORKPLACE VIOLENCE

The effects of workplace violence can range in intensity and include the following:
- Minor and serious physical injuries
- Temporary and permanent physical disability
- Psychological trauma
- Death

Workplace violence may also lead to negative organizational outcomes such as:
- Poor employee morale
- Increased job stress
- Higher employee turnover
- Reduced trust of management and coworkers
- Hostile working environment
- Poor organizational image
FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO WORKPLACE VIOLENCE

Certain patient conditions can increase the risk for violence in the healthcare setting, such as:
- Personality disorders
- Psychosis
- Dementia
- Developmental impairment
- History of violence
- Substance abuse

In addition, certain occupational factors can also contribute, such as:
- Understaffing on a unit (few clinical personnel and large volume of patients)
- Lack of patient privacy
- Use of restraints and/or seclusion
- High volume of activity (admissions, discharges, visitors, etc.) on the unit
- Long waits for service
- Transporting patients to/from procedures
- Overcrowded, uncomfortable waiting rooms
- Working alone, especially during high volume of activity
- Poor environmental design (poorly lit hallways, corridors, parking garage, etc.)
- Lack of training for internal staff
- Presence of personal weapons
PREVENTION STRATEGIES

To prevent violence in healthcare facilities, organizations should develop a safety and health program that includes:

- Management commitment
- Employee participation
- Hazard identification
- Safety and health training
- Hazard prevention, control, and reporting

Organizations should evaluate this program periodically. Although risk factors for violence are unique to each facility and its work environment, general prevention strategies can be followed.

Environmental designs can also help with prevention:

- Develop emergency signaling, alarms, and monitoring systems.
- Install security devices such as metal detectors to prevent armed persons from entering the facility.
- Install other security devices such as cameras and good lighting in hallways, parking garages, corridors.
- Provide security escorts to parking lots at night.
- Design waiting areas to accommodate visitors and patients who may have a delay in service.
- Design the triage area and other public areas to minimize the risk of assault.
- Provide staff restrooms and emergency exits.
- Install enclosed nurses’ stations.
- Install deep service counters or bullet-resistant and shatterproof glass enclosures in reception areas.
- Arrange furniture and other objects to minimize their use as weapons.

Behavior modification strategies to help prevent workplace violence include:

- Provide all workers with training in how to recognize and manage escalating behavior and potential and actual assaults, and how to safely resolve conflicts.

Administrative strategies could include:

- Design staffing patterns to prevent personnel from working alone and to minimize patient waiting time.
- Restrict the movement of the public in facilities by card-controlled or keypad access.
- Develop a system for alerting security personnel when violence is threatened.
- Implement a zero-tolerance policy that prohibits any form of violence between staff members.
DEALING WITH THE CONSEQUENCES

Even with the best preventive measures in place, violence still may occur in the healthcare workplace.

Facilities should be prepared to deal with the consequences of this violence by:

- Providing an environment that promotes open communication
- Developing written procedures for reporting and responding to violence
- Offering and encouraging counseling whenever a worker is threatened or assaulted
SAFETY TIPS FOR HEALTHCARE WORKERS

Watch for warning signals that may be associated with impending violence, such as:

- Verbally expressed anger and frustration
- Body language such as threatening gestures
- Signs of drug or alcohol use
- Presence of a weapon

If you see warning signals, use these techniques to help diffuse anger:

- Display calm and caring attitude
- Don’t threaten retaliation
- Don’t give orders
- Acknowledge the person’s feelings (for example, “I know you are frustrated”)
- Avoid any behavior that could be interpreted as aggressive, such as:
  - Moving rapidly
  - Getting too close
  - Touching
  - Speaking loudly

Be alert:

- Evaluate each situation for potential violence when you enter a room or begin to relate to a patient or visitor.
- Be vigilant throughout the encounter.
- Don’t isolate yourself with a potentially violent person.
- Always keep an open path for exiting; don’t let a potentially violent person stand between you and the door.

Take these steps if you can’t defuse the situation quickly:

- Remove yourself from the situation (walk away).
- Call security or 911 for help.
- Report any violent incidents to your manager.
CONCLUSION

There is no universal strategy that can prevent workplace violence. It is the responsibility of all healthcare facilities to develop a comprehensive violence prevention program.

Because risk factors vary among facilities – and even within them – the best approach is to identify risk factors in specific work scenarios and develop strategies to reduce them. A zero-tolerance policy that prohibits any form of workplace violence should be enforced.

As a healthcare worker, you should be alert and cautious when interacting with patients and visitors. Actively participate in your facility’s safety training programs, and become familiar with your facility’s policies and procedures on violence prevention.

REFERENCES: