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Violence Against Healthcare Workers: an Epidemic within a Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

Objectives:

- To identify the prevalence and causes of violence or harassment towards healthcare workers during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Assess the mental, physical and social effects of violence on healthcare workers.
- Identify current intervention strategies and propose future strategies

Methods:

- Research was conducted through a systematic literature review
- Used public health databases
- Peer reviewed journal articles from 2020 onward

Results:

- Violence is severely underreported
- Difficulty in finding intervention strategies that are effective
- Need for criminal/law intervention
- Misinformation and misplaced blame surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic is the main contributor of increased violence.

Conclusion:

Violence against healthcare workers is a public health issue that threatens the very structure of health systems.

BACKGROUND

- Violence and harassment towards healthcare workers is not a new phenomenon.
- Brought into the spotlight with the media coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Mistrust, confusion, fear and frustration surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic have caused an uptick in violence towards healthcare workers
- Attacks are in the workplace, streets, and homes
- Violence towards healthcare workers has severe implications for their mental and physical well being
- Contributes to staffing shortage, which only further contributes to patient/family/public anger
- Threatens the healthcare system
- An emergent public health issue

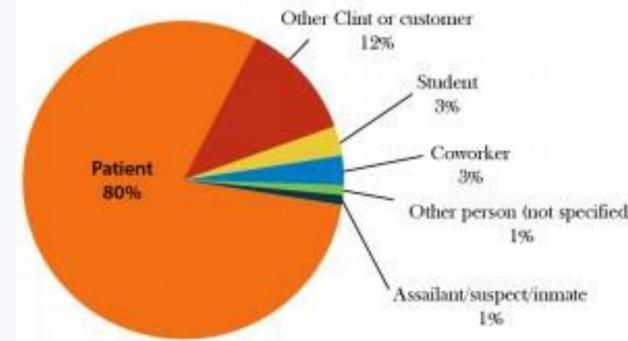
METHODS

Research was conducted through a systematic literature review. Sources were gathered through various public health databases. Journal articles were selected based on peer reviews and publishing dates in 2020 or later. This ensured that data and reports regarding violence towards healthcare workers are from the period of the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically. Information and data from years prior to the pandemic was used to compare rates and reports to determine if there has been an uptick in violence towards healthcare workers with the onset of the pandemic. The literature was evaluated to determine the potential causes of increased violence, current procedures and protections in place, and potential solution or policies to address the problems.



Source: Kudacki, P. (2020, September 22). Amy O'Sullivan [Photograph]. TIME Magazine. <https://time.com/collection/100-most-influential-people-2020/>

Healthcare Worker Injuries Resulting in Days Away from Work, by Source



Data source: Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), 2013 Data. These cover three broad industry sector: ambulatory healthcare services, hospitals, and nursing and residential care facilities. Source categories are defined by BLS.

RESULTS

- Prior to COVID-19, 61.9% of healthcare workers reported being exposed to violence (physical or verbal) within the last year of service.²
- Reports of violence are significantly less prevalent than the actual occurrence of violence.²
- 611 incidents of violence were recorded between February 1 and July 31, 2020.³
 - 67% directed at health care workers
 - 20% were physical assaults
 - 15% were verbal assaults or threats
 - 15% were classified as fear-based discrimination
- 8.4% of healthcare workers reported misconceptions about the COVID-19 vaccines were a cause of verbal violence.¹
- There is as severe lack of research to help support intervention programs and development of policies and laws.⁷
- Current de-escalation techniques focus on improving healthcare provider communication with patient and family, instructing perpetrators to stop, and limiting interactions with perpetrators - found to be ineffective.²
- Strategies such as carrying a phone, wearing a distress badge, self-defense training and social support are found to be the most effective of current interventions.²

DISCUSSION

- Proper policy making & implementation is needed to prevent more violence.
- Legal or criminal action is needed to provide security and accountability.
- Funding of security programs is necessary.⁶
- Accurate reporting of all violence in the WHO Surveillance System of Attacks on Healthcare.⁶
- Collaboration of healthcare facilities, local/state health departments and community members is necessary to reduce mistrust, educate and strengthen the relationships between patient and provider.⁶

CONCLUSION

Violence and harassment towards healthcare workers is a growing public health issue that needs effective and immediate intervention. Creating a safe environment for healthcare workers is crucial to their mental and physical well being. It is also critical to the healthcare system. Staff burnout and shortages will only continue to increase as confusion, mistrust, and fear escalate between patient and provider. This poses a public health threat not only to healthcare providers, but also the community they serve.

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