

On Occupational Health and Safety

Violence in Health Care

Partnership working to protect nurses and other health care workers

by Helena Bryan

If you've visited an emergency room, acute care, or long-term care facility in B.C. recently you may have noticed some new signs. "Violence, foul language and abusive behaviours are not acceptable," they read. "Verbal threats or acts of violence will not be tolerated and may result in removal from this facility and/or prosecution."

The words are forceful and reflect a disturbing fact of working in the health care sector: at no other job are employees more likely to be verbally abused, bitten, scratched, or bruised. These are among the more mundane attacks that health care workers can face every day. There are also the incidents that make headlines: a nurse stabbed at New Westminsters' Royal Columbian Hospital; and an elderly volunteer at Campbell River Hospital who died following an assault by a patient.

An issue too long ignored

Working in an environment where such acts of violence occur contributes to the stress and burnout plaguing this sector. "Exposure to violence is the number one issue leading to burnout," says Mike Sagar, health care industry specialist at WorkSafeBC. "When people start questioning their safety at work and don't get the post-incident support, morale is bound to drop. There's a psychological and emotional aspect to this issue too. Physical wounds can heal quickly, but the psychological scars can take years."

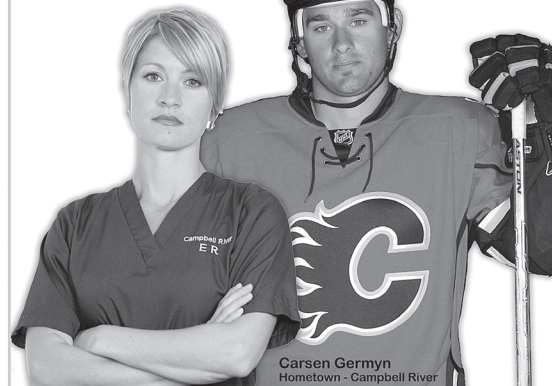
And an industry already suffering significant labour shortages can ill afford to ignore this issue, says Margaret Dhillon, a nurse and spokesperson for the BC Nurses Union. "There are more days lost to violence in this sector than in any other. And the incidence of violence is on the rise."

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Indeed, from 2003 to 2007, the number of claims due to violence and force (a subjective term referring to an "unintentional" act of violence not directed at an individual) rose by almost 40 percent.

Who do you think is more likely to be injured by violence on the job?



Carsen Germyn
Hometown - Campbell River

Each year nearly 700 Vancouver Island health care workers are hurt or threatened.

CARE FOR THOSE WHO CARE FOR YOU

Please help us keep a safe health care environment for all.



A new era of cooperation, collaboration

It's a situation requiring urgent measures. Which is why a little more than a year ago B.C.'s six health care authorities, the five unions representing health care employers, WorkSafeBC, employer associations, and occupational health and safety groups formed a provincial Violence Prevention Committee.

"We've had bipartite committees on this issue before," says Dhillon, "But this committee is unique in its breadth. It means all the stakeholders are on the same page."

Sagar agrees. "The level of interaction and discussion is unprecedented and the steps taken so far are very promising."

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New Tools Available to Achieve Work-Life Balance at your Workplace!

Do employees at your workplace work long hours? Do they have difficulty taking time off for personal or family needs? The Workplace Stress Initiative recently developed a new Powerpoint presentation to help health and safety committees promote work-life balance for employees in their workplaces.

Lack of balance between work and our lives outside of work can cause stress in the workplace, one of the risk factors for mental illness, as well as many physical illnesses. According to Ann Harry, chairperson of the Workplace Stress Initiative, "In uncertain economic times, workplace stress is a cost Manitoba employers cannot afford. Yet employers continue to see the growing consequences of stress in their workplaces in the form of absenteeism, lowered productivity, workplace conflict, mental health problems and rising benefit costs." Employers can promote and encourage work-life balance by embracing the following types of practices: flexible hours, family leave, good communication, manageable workloads, employee assistance programs, and supportive management practices.

The first step in getting work-life balance initiatives started at your workplace is to survey workers about their needs and desires. The Workplace Stress Initiative has also developed an employee survey to help you take this first step.

If you want to make a case for work-life balance at your workplace, download a copy of the Powerpoint presentation and the employee survey at www.workplacestressinitiative.ca/workplace_practices.html

Inquest into death at Flin Flon Smelter

Eight years after a Flin Flon smelter worker died after an explosion at the Hudson Bay Mining and Smelting company, an inquest has produced recommendations for changes to Manitoba's Workplace Safety and Health Act.

Steve Ewing, a 33 year old father of five, suffered burns to 95% of his body after the explosion and died eight days later. Thirteen other workers were injured.

The judge's report concluded that the explosion was not foreseeable and that it is unlikely to happen again. The inquest report recommends that regulations for operations of mines be changed to ensure that water is never allowed to come into contact with molten material. The report also recommends that all workers should be required to report "near misses" and that workers should never be tethered to mobile equipment. One injured worker had difficulty getting away because he was harnessed to the machinery as a safety precaution.

Many workers, labour unions and the Manitoba Federation of Labour are disappointed with the inquest report, saying it stopped short of the kind of sweeping changes that would prevent further tragedies. For a critical analysis of the inquest report go to the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternative's "Fast Facts: Endless Inquest Misses the Point" by Doug Smith at <http://www.policyalternatives.ca/da794529/>

Upcoming Events

How Much Occupational Disease is There in Canada?

OHC public presentation by Dr. Allen Kraut
March 3, 2009 - 9:00 am - 10:00 am
275 Broadway, Winnipeg

Canadian Federation of Agriculture (CFA) presents

2009 Canadian Agriculture Safety Week
March 11-17, 2009
For more information call 613-822-0016 or
go to www.cfa-fca.ca

Work-Life Balance for Health & Safety Committees

OHC public presentation by Maureen Grace
April 7, 2009 - 9:00 am - 10:00 am
275 Broadway, Winnipeg

Memorial Service

Day of Mourning for Workers killed & injured on the job
April 28, 2009 - 6:30 pm
Union Centre, 275 Broadway, Winnipeg
For more information call 947-1400

Safe Work for an Aging Workforce

OHC public presentation by Andrew Dolhy
May 5, 2009 - 9:00 am - 10:00 am
275 Broadway, Winnipeg

Manitoba Federation of Labour presents

Annual Health & Safety Conference
May 7 & 8, 2009
Winnipeg Convention Centre
For more information call 947-1400

How Dangerous is it for Outdoor Workers in Summer?

OHC public presentation by Dr. Ted Redekop, Chief
Occupational Medical Officer, Labour and Immigration,
Workplace Safety and Health Division
June 2, 2009 - 9:00 am - 10:00 am
275 Broadway, Winnipeg

Changing the culture

The signage is just one part of a comprehensive strategy that seeks first to raise awareness of the scale of the issue, then to either prevent or mitigate the risks of violence so health care workers feel supported and protected on the job.

As part of the awareness initiative, a sophisticated social marketing campaign that includes TV and newspaper advertising and mall displays was rolled out in Campbell River in October. A survey in early 2009 will gauge its success. If it proves effective, it will expand province-wide.

Sagar says raising awareness is the first step to changing a culture that assumes these abuses are part of a health care worker's job and that they should simply put up with it. Health care worker Holly Anderson agrees.

"We tend to slough off this stuff and as a group we've traditionally dealt with it by not dealing with it," says Anderson, a maternity ward nurse at Campbell River Hospital. During her 29 years of nursing she's been bitten, had her hair pulled, and her neck scratched. "These weren't accidents; they were acts of aggression by my patients," she insists. "And what really upset me was that I got no support afterwards."

The good news, says Anderson, is that a new generation of health care workers is more assertive when it comes to safety and wellness. "They're being taught that you don't have to take it."

Preventing, mitigating the risks

The second part of the Violence Committee's strategy is to develop evidence-based best practices to prevent or mitigate the risks of violence. An environmental scan identifying existing programs and a document titled Elements of a Best-Practice Violence Prevention Program have already been completed.

Risk assessment tools are being developed and will be tested in February during stakeholder workshops. The next step, developing tools to control the risks, is the most important step from an employer's perspective, says Frances Kersteins, who represents the Health Employers' Association on the committee.

"It doesn't help to know where the risks are if you don't know how to eliminate or mitigate them," Kersteins says. "What is the evidence for what works to prevent or mitigate risk on the front lines in a way that is sustainable resource-wise?"

Answering that question will be a priority, and a significant challenge for committee members for the next several months. What makes the issue of violence in health care so challenging is its complexity says Dhillon. The roots of violence are deep-seated and diverse, requiring more than a one-size-fits-all solution she points out.

Diverse causes, distinct solutions Kersteins agrees. To start, she says, there's a clinical reason for some of the violence. "Someone with dementia or a mental health issue who lashes out does so for different reasons than

someone who turns up at the ER drunk. One is a criminal act; the other isn't."


"The long-term care nurses get roughed up on a regular basis," says Anderson, who notes that systemic issues related to bed shortages can compound the challenges of working with these patients. "When there are not enough beds for dementia patients in long-term care, they have been placed in acute care with limited controls. It increases the risks for nurses and it's also unfair for the patients."

Delays in receiving health care can put stress on patients and their families, says Dhillon, increasing the likelihood of becoming verbally or physically abusive.

Dhillon points to other facts that may also play a role in the increasing violence: a decrease in respect for workers in health care; and a general de-sensitization to violence. She also notes growing gang violence in the province – an issue that starts in the streets but can end in emergency rooms with health care workers caught in the conflict.

In spite of the challenges, committee members are optimistic that solutions will be found. After all, they've taken the first crucial step by putting aside their differences and engaging in meaningful dialogue.

This article is reprinted with permission from WorkSafe magazine. The original article appeared in the November/December 2008 issue (Volume 8, No. 6).

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Postal Code _____	Winnipeg, Manitoba R3C 4M6	

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this website!**

BackCare

<http://www.backcare.org.uk/>

This website is run by a U.K. charity to help people manage and prevent back pain. Find out about the causes and types of back pain, how to prevent back pain, what treatments are available and how back pain can be managed at work.

did you know...?

May 3-9, 2009

**is
North American Occupational Safety
and Health (NAOSH) Week**

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For more information go to: www.naosh.org



Do you have an article, information or story about workplace health and safety that you want to share?

We reserve the right to edit. Send your newsletter contributions for "Focus on Occupational Health and Safety" to Karen Hamilton at khamilton@mflohc.mb.ca or fax: 956-0848

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The OHC provides the following services to Manitobans:

- **medical services to help you find out if your job is making you sick**
- **education and assistance to workplace health and safety committees to identify and resolve health and safety problems.**
- **special initiatives with immigrant and Aboriginal communities**
- **information and library services, Monday to Friday from 9 am to 5 pm**

Healthy Workplaces Healthy Workers Healthy Communities