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Workplace violence risk assessment & resulting plan a must

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To The Daily Sun,

Recently, I was surprised to find my name appearing in an article in the New Hampshire Union Leader (Five health workers injured in less than a month at state-run facilities, August 22, 2017). While seeing my name in print in this context has caused me more than a little sense of intrusion and panic, I feel that it does open the door to opportunity for improvement.

On June 26, I was violently assaulted by a psychiatric patient while on duty at my job. The physical injuries resulting from being punched and kicked in the head, neck, chest and back included skull fractures, a hemorrhage between my skull and brain, a severe concussion, and other damage. My recovery continues with the help of many caring and kind healthcare professionals. My goal is to return to full functioning in my professional and personal life. As a registered nurse with over 30 years of experience, I understand that hospital and health care workers are at elevated risk for violence-related workplace injuries requiring medical treatment and time out of work. I've had countless hours of training on how to evaluate, manage and de-escalate potentially violent encounters with patients and others in health care settings, and at the time of my injury I was paying attention and following standard protocols. At times, we find ourselves in situations which far exceed the tools and training at hand. My recent experience is a good example of this dilemma. In order to protect my own health and safety and that of other patients and staff when the violent act that resulted in my injuries occurred, I would have had to be an expert in hand-to-hand combat.



In a recent interview, Health and Human Services Commissioner Jeffrey Meyers said New Hampshire Hospital staff are trained to deal with violent situations, and staff who are injured are given paid time off from work. My family and I are grateful for this financial support and can only hope that other injured health care workers receive the same level of benefits while regaining physical and emotional health after an assault. This financial support is a response to the reality of health care workplace violence, not a solution. All health care organizations and facilities, not just individual staff, need to take concrete steps to prevent workplace violence and protect the health and physical safety of patients, visitors and employees.

Beyond staff training, there are many strategies hospitals and health care facilities can use to reduce the incidence of workplace violence. In 2016, the U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration published comprehensive guidelines for preventing workplace violence for health care and social service workers. Recommendations include simple steps like improving lighting, controlling access to work areas and installing “panic button” alarms in every room. Maintaining adequate staffing levels and providing security coverage in high-risk facilities are also critical. Perhaps, most importantly, there needs to be a continuous and transparent communication regarding safety between direct caregivers and administration of an organization.



In 2016, the New Hampshire Senate voted along party lines to defeat a bill to require all state-licensed health care facilities to perform an annual workplace violence risk assessment and develop written violence prevention plans with specific actions to reduce risk. As the survivor of an extreme incident of workplace violence in a health care setting, I do not comprehend how this can be a partisan issue. New Hampshire must do a better job of protecting the health and safety of our health care workers. I have contacted my state senator and urged him to sponsor and support 2018 legislation to ensure that every health care worker in a state-licensed facility is protected by the same workplace violence prevention standards and best practices.

New Hampshire residents and our elected representatives should not accept the premise that the unchecked threat of workplace violence is just a normal and unalterable condition of working in health care and social service professions. What happened to me should never happen to anyone. My peers and I consider it an honor and a privilege to provide compassionate care for our patients and their loved ones. Please raise your voices in support of this legislation so that we may give that care in a safer health care environment.

June Garen, RN

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