



Patient and visitor violence in general hospitals: A systematic review of the literature

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ABSTRACT

Patient and visitor violence (PVV) is a complex occupational hazard for health care staff working in general hospitals. In order to reduce the deficit of information regarding this kind of PVV, a systematic literature review that describes and summarizes the current scientific knowledge on this topic was conducted. The literature search identified 84 studies. These were analyzed for research quality and those with good or moderate research quality were selected ($n=31$). In most studies, a retrospective self reported cross-sectional design and a broad definition of violence were employed. Additionally, most of the questionnaires applied were developed by the researchers and utilized different retrospective time frames. Unfortunately, information about the validity of the questionnaires was often lacking. Results of this review suggest that PVV is a serious problem for health care staff in general hospitals, especially those working in medical and surgical units. Workplace characteristics and the interaction between patients and staff are important contextual factors that can contribute to the development of violent incidents. Because the studies reviewed employed different methodologies, instruments, and definitions, comparison was difficult. We, therefore, recommend that future research use clearer conceptual frameworks and unique instruments.

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1. Introduction

Work-related violence in the health care system is a complex and dangerous occupational hazard for health care staff that has increased continuously in recent years (Beech & Leather, 2006; Cooper & Swanson, 2002). Among all occupational groups, health care workers are ranked as one of the most likely groups to experience workplace aggression (Bourn, 2003; Chappell & Di Martino, 2006; Wells & Bowers, 2002). Unfortunately, the definitions of violence or aggression used in research on this topic are inconsistent. This hampers the comparison of research results (Chappell & Di Martino, 2006; Lau & Magarey, 2006; Rippon, 2000). Nevertheless, numerous studies have shown that work-related violence can negatively affect the psychological and physical well-being of health care staff (Needham, Abderhalden, Halfens, Fischer, & Dassen, 2005; Richter & Berger, 2000; Stanko, 2002). It can also impact their job motivation and the quality of the care they provide (Arnetz & Arnetz, 2001; Needham et al., 2005). An additional important yet often forgotten impact of work-related violence is the financial loss ensued by the health care system (Bourn, 2003; McKenna, 2004; Philbrick, Sparks, Hass, & Arsenault, 2003).

While extensive efforts have been made to understand the processes involved in patient and patient's relatives or visitor violence (PVV) in psychiatric settings, relatively few attempts have been made to examine the problem in general health care settings (Cooper & Swanson, 2002; Duxbury & Whittington, 2005; Winstanley & Whittington, 2002) despite the fact that PVV in general hospitals is a serious problem for all staff categories in all clinical departments (Hegney, Plank, & Parker, 2003; Hesketh et al., 2003; Winstanley & Whittington, 2004a). Little is known about the frequency of PVV, the context in which these events occur, and the effect of PVV on health care staff in general hospitals (O'Connell, Young, Brooks, Hutchings, & Lofthouse, 2000; Whittington, Shuttleworth, & Hill, 1996; Winstanley & Whittington, 2004a). Most studies have focused on accident and emergency departments (Fernandes et al., 1999; Lau, Magarey, & McCutcheon, 2006). To date, no literature review has summarized research results on PVV in general hospitals.

The main research questions in the present literature review were therefore: (1) How often does PVV against health care staff in general hospitals occur and what is known about the different forms of PVV?; (2) In which contexts does PVV occur in general hospital settings?; and (3) What are the patient, visitor, and staff characteristics that contribute to PVV?

In this study, violence was considered synonymous to aggression (Rippon, 2000). And PVV was defined as any verbal, non-verbal, or physical behavior that threatens others or property, or that actually harms others or property (Morrison, 1990).

2. Method

The following electronic databases were searched: Medline, Cochrane Library, Cumulative Index to Nursing and Allied Health Literature (CINAHL), PsycINFO, Physiotherapy Evidence Database (PEDro) and Midwifery and Infant Care (MIDIRS). The search was limited to articles with abstracts in German or English published in the last 16 years (from 1990 to August, 2006). The keywords used and the search results are listed in Table 1. In addition to the search, the references in the articles were screened for missed research articles. Unpublished manuscripts were collected by approaching experts and colleagues with knowledge in the field.

The 84 publications initially selected were first analyzed for their content according to the research questions. The following publications were excluded: (1) publications reporting on research in the field of psychiatric and accident and emergency health care (these were excluded because their settings and patients' state of health do not compare well with those in general hospitals and because in these fields literature reviews already exist) (Davis, 1991; Gadon, Johnstone, & Cook, 2006; Lau et al., 2006); (2) publications in which the research results were not clearly linked to a general hospital, its wards and/or its professionals; (3) publications in which the research results were not clearly assigned to PVV against health care staff; and (4) publications that were not based on research (e.g. opinions, comments, or anecdotal material).

Table 1
Search history and results

Source	Hits	Selection based on reading abstract (checked for overlaps)	Selection based on content analysis of the publication	Selection based on critical appraisal of the publication
Medline	523	50	27	25
Cochrane	1	0		
CINAHL	187	15	1	1
PsycInfo	204	4	1	1
PEDro	0			
MIDIRS	224	4	0	
Others		11	9	7
Total publications	1159	84	41	34 ^a

Keywords used: (violence OR aggression OR patient assault) AND (general hospital OR workplace).

Limits: Published in 1996–August 2006, only items with abstracts in English or German.

^a 31 studies, because three studies published results in two articles.

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