Title -Violence Against Healthcare Professionals: A Review

**Abstract**

As dentistry has moved into the 21st century the emphasis on ethics has increased. The general public has become more or rather over mindful and attentive to their surroundings, especially towards the medical field. Assaults against healthcare professionals in India have increased dramatically over the past few years. It has therefore become the need of the moment to learn how to tackle the problem of workplace violence and medico-legal issues that may arise. It is necessary for all professionals in the health care community to stay updated on the current scenarios, laws and new regulations. Knowledge of ‘what not to do’ has become more significant rather than ‘what to do’.

This article highlights the problem of violence against healthcare professionals and the methods which can be used to prevent and stop it.

**Keywords**: Violence against healthcare professionals, Preventive measures, Code Violet, Professional Indemnity Insurance, Consumer Protection Act

**Key Messages:** Awareness for the Health care professional regarding the laws governing the healthcare professionals, and ways to prevent violence against Healthcare Workers.

**Introduction**

‘No physician, however conscientious or careful, can tell what day or hour he may not be the object of some undeserved attack, malicious accusation, black mail or suit for damages….’[1]

This statement holds true to this day. Assaults against medical professionals has been on the rise, not just in the Indian subcontinent, but all the over the world.

These days violence against healthcare professionals is a regular headline in most of the newspapers in India. Therefore, it has become the need of the hour for the healthcare sector as a whole, to handle workplace violence and protect themselves.

**What is Workplace Violence?**

The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) defines workplace violence as “violent acts, including physical assaults and threats of assault, directed toward persons at work or on duty.”

[OSHA defines workplace violence as](https://www.osha.gov/SLTC/workplaceviolence/) “any act or threat of physical violence, harassment, intimidation, or other threatening disruptive behaviour that occurs at the work site. It ranges from threats and verbal abuse to physical assaults and even homicide. It can affect and involve employees, clients, customers, and visitors.”

There are different forms of violence that a health care professional may encounter while on duty. It can be manifested in the form of physical violence, ranging from minor bruises to broken bones and even death, verbal abuse and threats, emotional abuse, psychological trauma, vandalism, sexual assault and stalking.

**Prevalence Rates of Violence against Healthcare Workers**

Worldwide reviews of literature show that 25–70% of the doctors have been exposed to some sort of violence in the last one year of their interview and in 7–8% of the cases the violence had been physical leading to murderous assault.[2][3][4]. Rates of incidents of violence in various different countries given by the World Health Organization are:

* India-70%
* Australia-67%
* South Africa-64%
* United Kingdom-65%
* United States of America-75%
* Israel-74%
* Thailand-54%
* Brazil-47%

According to a survey conducted by the Indian Medical Association in 2018, it was found that 25% of doctors have faced some sort of violence during their working hours.

High-risk areas have been identified as patient's house during house visits (particularly night) and waiting area in the clinic, paediatrics, physiology, emergency, Intensive Care Unit (ICU) and major violence makers are patients or their close relatives. [5]

**Triggering Factors**

There are various predisposing factors that lead to violence against medical workers. It is not just one factor but multi-factorial in nature. As members of the medical fraternity, it is critical and essential that all healthcare workers know about these factors and be able to tackle them as and when required. Some of the major factors are elaborated below.

Improper communication or miscommunication with not just the patient but also his/her attending results in false assumptions and expectations from the patients’ point of view. Inadequate and insufficient explanation of the diagnosis, plan of management, and the associated risks and benefits and inability to clear the doubts that may arise can reduce the confidence of the patient and can also lead to medico-legal issues.

In today’s world of digital and social media, it has become very simple and easy to spread news like wildfire. Journalism has a profound impact on the general public. It is extremely easy for a false accusation made on a doctor or healthcare worker without proof to lead to a sense of distrust among the people. Social media plays a major role in demonizing professionals.

Due to the high work related stress, increased pressure and the growing patient to doctor ratio, medical professionals are overloaded and weighted down with more patients than they can handle. This indubitably results in lowered and deteriorated quality of services provided. Also, if the working environment is termed unsafe, the practice of defensive medicine may come into play and medical workers would want to save their own skin rather than treating a patient.

Indian medical schools are excellent in imparting medical training to their students; however teaching to be empathetic toward the patient is seriously lacking. Young doctors fresh out of medical school are often not empathetic enough with the patients and attendants, leading to a sense of perceived neglect that is a triggering factor. [6]

Majority of the patients lack medical insurance. Therefore, the expenditure towards the treatment may come as a shock to them. This annoyance and anger may be directed towards the medical professional.

Shortage of security personnel is a safety concern. Emergency doctors, doctors on night shifts, have to play the role of a security guard while on duty. There is no fixed or established security and safety protocol in place in many of the institutions, hospitals and private practices. Crowds of people who interfere with the emergency treatment often accompany accident victims. The doctor must resuscitate the patient while also managing the crowd and worrying about mob psychology. The attacks are often started by people, at times by a local leader, who are unrelated to the patient. When a relative starts an argument, others join in the fray. [7]

There are laws that deem violence against health care professionals, while they are on duty, as a punishable, non bailable and cognizable offence. But they haven’t been implemented adequately. The public is aware of this issue and they have taken advantage of this disadvantage, thereby leading to bolder attacks. The corrupt judicial system makes it hard for both the patients and the healthcare professionals to place their trust in it. Moreover, the legal procedures are extremely lengthy and time consuming.

The scenario of sudden death is most commonly seen in emergency and trauma or accident cases. The relatives have an unrealistic expectation that the doctors will be able to save the life of their loved one irrespective of the medical condition and medical status. Sudden death instigates mobs and fuels anger among the relatives and by-standers.

**Impact of Violence**

Violence against medical professionals not only has a negative effect on the victims of assault, but on the healthcare sector as a whole.

The victims suffer from physical injury inflicted on them ranging from minor cuts and scratches to bruises and broken bones, emotional and psychological trauma. Due to strikes, protests and shutting down of hospitals and private practices, disruption of services is brought about. This affects the society on the whole.

Medical professionals, even those with years of experience, may hesitate and second guess their medical judgements and decisions. Increase in the number of referrals, hesitation in treating emergency cases and increased frequency of transferring patients may be seen.

**What can be done in case of an Attack?**

Worldwide Code Violet alludes the hospital’s response to violent and/or combative persons when they pose a threat to self and/or others. Generally referring to “unruly patient”, Code Violet in the Indian Context can also aptly be construed in case of unruly attendants and mob that are ready to destroy hospital property.

* At the onset of any visible disturbance or impending violence, a message of Code Violet mentioning the exact location of the incident shall be announced over the hospital’s public address system. This will disseminate information indicating an imminent attack by relatives of patient expecting a prompt action by the staff. The operator will make an “all call” announcement over the internal public address system and state three times “Code Violet.”
* Siren system may be installed all across the hospital which may be activated immediately by the concerned doctor/staff in case of any possibility of violence in hospital.
* Security will respond immediately and provide assistance as needed.
* All the members of staff except O.T and ICU and those involved in emergency care of patients shall immediately arrive at the scene and form a human chain around hospital personnel under threat as well as in-front of the agitated relatives.
* The personnel involved in the chain have to be extremely quiet, and avoid any altercation/discussion which can escalate the situation.
* A senior member of staff (can be designated before) who himself is not directly involved in treatment in that particular case shall politely communicate with relatives of patients and try to verbally de-escalate a threatening situation.
* In this situation, there should not be argument on part of the hospital staff and the designated member should give enough opportunity to the disgruntled patient/attendant to explain their grievances. All the members of staff shall exercise restraint and shall not lose their cool under any circumstance.
* Once the situation is under control, the operator will make an “all call” announcement over the internal public address system and state three times “Code Violet clear.”
* If the situation is not under control and law and order situation arises in the form of assault, external help shall be sought from nearby hospitals and Police.[8]

In case of violent and physical attacks, security staff with law authorized ammunition must be recruited immediately and the concerned law enforcement officers should be notified.

**Preventive Measures**

Measures to prevent such attacks from taking place should be taken by the Government, the Institutions, Hospitals, the Professionals and the General Public.

1. By the Government

Implementation and raising awareness of the existing laws must be carried out.

In India, 19 states have an act known as the Medical Protection Act (MPA). It states that attacking a healthcare professional or damaging healthcare facility can attract a fine of ₹50,000 and jail term for three years. Assault upon a doctor is a non bailable criminal offence and attracts imprisonment for a term which may extend three years or a fine or both under The Medicare Service Personnel and Medicare Service Institutions (Prevention of Violence and Damage to Property) Act.

Equipping the primary and secondary centres with adequate drugs, instruments, and staff can result in many conditions getting cured at this level itself, thereby leaving the doctors in the tertiary care centres to give more time and attention to cases which require skilled intervention from them. National policies for education, health awareness, immunization, sanitation, clean drinking water and unadulterated food will go a long way in reducing the burden on an already choked healthcare system. [9]

1. By the Hospital/ Institutions/ Private Set Ups

Emergency protocols and Standard Operating Procedures should be established and implemented. Awareness regarding the same should be created among those working there.

Mock practice drills should be arranged so that students and staff are accustomed on what the procedure to be followed is.

Self defence training may be introduced in institutions for one’s safety and protection.

Importance of empathy and basic communication must be taught and inculcated into budding professionals.

1. By the Health Care Professional

First and foremost is the fact that the professional should know his/her capabilities. One must not overreach and go beyond one’s capabilities.

Effective communication is essential to build better doctor-patient relationships, gaining the patients trust and confidence, and for a better outcome of the treatment.

Clear and well structured explanation regarding the diagnosis, treatment plan, benefits and risks, cost should be given to the patient. A written informed consent should mandatorily be taken from the patient. This not only helps in effective treatment planning and progress, but also in medico-legal issues if and when they arise.

1. By the Public

Disputes that may emerge should be solved in a civilized manner and without the use of violence.

The public needs to understand and face reality and know that no treatment is 100% effective. The professionals give their best in trying to save lives, some days it’s possible and some days it’s not. The people need to accept this fact.

Owing to the fact that the media has such tremendous influence on the mindset of the public, it is important that only verified and unbiased news reports should be provided.

**Professional Indemnity Insurance**

It is becoming legally and financially dangerous to treat patients with complex diseases for whom the outcome is uncertain and imperfect results are common. The law suits are not only steadily increasing in number and cost, but are demonstrably jeopardizing the cure of the patient. The litigious atmosphere has led to a practice called 'Defensive Medicine'. [10]

According to a 2013 survey by Dr. Ashish Jha of Harvard School of Public Health, India recorded 5.2 million medico legal cases in a year, for an incorrect prescription, wrong timing, and errors in surgery, incorrect drug, and dosage. Therefore, to protect doctors from the above financial risk, a special financial cover known as Professional Indemnity Insurance (PII) is introduced. Doctors are the professionals who face the risk of financial liability while practicing their profession. The amount they can be sued can be very high. Therefore, they need a special financial cover to protect themselves financially when they are sued for unprofessional conduct, negligence, or mistakes during treatments. In short, PII is an insurance policy specially meant for professionals to cover liability falling on them as a result of errors, negligence, and mistakes committed by them while rendering their professional service. [11]

The Indian Dental Association launched the first PII at the 65th Indian Dental Association Conference held at Mumbai on February 1, 2012. [12]

All claims relating to compensations are dealt in a court of law. However, in the best of hands and without negligence complications sometimes can and do occur. Complications that occur in the presence of good planning and communication and are managed appropriately do not amount to negligence, and are unlikely to lead to a successful claim. [13]

**Consumer Protection Act**

The Supreme Court clearly states that professional services rendered by professionals such as doctors and dentists clearly fall in the definition of section 2 (0) of the Consumer Protection Act and therefore Doctors and Dentists cannot dispute the applicability of 'deficiency of service' to the services they render.    
One of the reasons for bringing medical negligence into the ambit of the CP Act is because the Indian Medical Council Act 1916 and the Indian Dentist Act 1948 has no provision:

* To entertain any complaint against from a patient.
* To take action against medical/dental doctors in cases of negligence.
* To award compensation.[14]

It is essential that all professionals have knowledge about the functioning of this Act.

**Conclusion**

Violence is not the answer to any problem and it must be reprimanded. The problem of violence against health care professionals has been increasing in India. Thus, it has become pressing matter and need to be dealt with promptly. There is a need for all the professionals to be aware of the laws governing their profession and the laws provided for their protection. Learning how to combat violent assaults and medico-legal issues among many other things makes for a competent healthcare professional.

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Abstract-132 words

Total-2443 words

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