



“Workplace Violence in Emergency Departments”

By Janice McKay, RN, CEN, CFRN

President-Elect Virginia State Council of the Emergency Nurses Association

The Virginia State Council of the Emergency Nurses Association (ENA) listened to the stories of workplace violence from emergency department nurses across the state. Emergency nurses face the risk of workplace violence on a daily occurrence. Studies have shown that Emergency nurses are vulnerable to work-related violence; incidents of nurses being verbally abused, threatened, harassed, intimidated or physically harmed and this makes emergency departments a dangerous work setting for healthcare providers. A study done by ENA found that more than half of emergency nurses, who responded to the survey, reported physical violence on the job which included being “spit on”, “jumped”, “hit”, “pushed or shoved”, “scratched” and even “kicked”.

Nurses have a greater risk of being a victim of workplace violence because of their direct contact with patients or their families when they are stressed by illness or injury. Emergency departments have the potential for volatile patients who may be under the influence of alcohol or drugs and a history of mental health illnesses. Other factors that can escalate into violence for healthcare personnel are long waits for service in emergency departments, overcrowded waiting rooms, inadequate security, and an increase in gangs or violent crimes.

Although many hospitals have programs in effect to prevent workplace violence – training workers in recognizing and managing conflict before it arises, encouraging situational awareness for potential violence outbreaks – violence can occur despite measures taken to prevent violent outbreaks.

Many cases of assault go unreported because of the absence of institutional reporting policies, feelings that assaults are part of their job or the belief that reporting will not benefit them since there is no law to protect them. The Emergency Nurses Association supports public policies that mitigate and deter acts of violence in the emergency department. Because of this, the ENA Virginia State Council’s Government Affairs Committee began to heighten the awareness of state legislators regarding workplace violence in emergency departments. The goal of the Government Affairs Committee was to pursue legislation making assault of emergency health care providers a felony offense punishable as determined by the law. Until July 1, 2011, the assault statute only protected fire, police and emergency medical service personnel, but not nurses.

Virginia Beach Delegate Christopher Stolle sponsored a bill to protect emergency healthcare providers in emergency rooms of a hospital or clinic. The bill passed and Virginia State Council Nurses were present on April 5, 2011 as Governor McDonnell signed the House bill, VA HB 1690, which goes into effect on July 1, 2011. This bill provides that the punishment for battery of a health care provider who is engaged in the performance of his/her duties as an emergency health care provider in an emergency room of a hospital or clinic or on the premises of any other facility rendering emergency medical care is a Class 1 misdemeanor, including a term of confinement of 15 days in jail, two days of which shall be mandatory minimum term of confinement.

The Virginia State Council of the Emergency Nurses Association views this as a major success in protecting our nurses and emergency healthcare providers in the emergency care setting. The bill will not eliminate workplace violence but may aid in decreasing the violence in our emergency departments with perpetrators knowing there is a penalty for assaulting an emergency nurse or emergency healthcare provider.