

Sticks and Stones

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Staff in the care sector are at high risk from verbal and physical attack when at work. There are 1.3 million incidents of work-related violence a year according to the British Crime Survey. These incidents can result in physical injuries or anxiety and stress for the people affected. They also have serious consequences for their employers who have to deal with the resulting poor staff morale, high absenteeism, recruitment and staff turnover problems and poor business image. Because of the wide variety of different jobs included in the sector it is difficult to establish exactly how many of these incidents involve care staff. However, according to the Task Force on Violence against Social Care Staff, violence and abuse are a greater problem for social and healthcare staff than for other professions.

The level of violence that carers are subjected to is often underestimated and misunderstood. As a result the risks they faced at work – to both their physical and emotional well being – are similarly neglected or ignored. There are three main reasons for this. First, underestimation of the problem. Several factors conspire to obscure its true nature: under-reporting is widespread, the culture of many organisations accidentally supports the abuse of staff, and employees frequently think that it ‘goes with the territory’ and simply put up with it. Second, there is confusion about the term ‘violence’. Some staff may feel that abuse such as spitting or insults, especially when perpetrated by a ‘vulnerable’ service user, is not really ‘violence’. This is particularly true among untrained or so called manual staff not versed in the language of care. Confusion about language also means that employers, usually unwittingly, might downgrade verbal abuse by invoking a “sticks and stones may break my bones but words can never hurt me” type of reasoning.

The third contributory factor follows on from the last. Staff generally have poor understanding of their rights and responsibilities, those who are poorly trained, non-English speakers or without the benefit of a professional training frequently under-estimate their own importance or think that reporting an incident would be taken as ‘whinging’.

Up to 80% of incidents go unreported. Among the many reasons given are “no time”, “it won’t make a difference”, or “loyalty to the client”. These are just some of the excuses I have heard while conducting surveys with care staff. Sadly, many people have also said that, even after a significant incident of abuse or even an attack, they did not report it because they actually feared being reprimanded for having somehow provoked the incident. One such case

was Charmaine who frequently had to put up with lewd suggestions from an elderly male resident. On one occasion he had even indecently exposed himself to her. "I didn't report it because, whatever happened, I would probably have to go on working with him. It would just have made things more difficult", she explained.

Low rates of reporting therefore give a false impression of the size of the problem. In a culture where employers are already burdened with increasing regulation, putting measures in place to protect staff is not top of the list. Increased staff training would involve both extra cost and difficulty in releasing staff. The perceived low priority, due to under reporting, supports this 'decision by default.'

Confusion about the term 'violence' not only makes reporting difficult, it also makes the whole subject vague and hard to define. Look at the literature on violence in the workplace and you will find a broad mix of terms such as conflict, violence, aggression, abuse, verbal abuse, threatening /challenging /difficult behaviour, anger, hostility... the list goes on. The terminology will change depending on who you speak to. Even the national Task Force, set up by the DOH in 1999 to investigate the problem, used a loose definition: "Violence and abuse take many forms. Verbal abuse is much more common than physical abuse." For clarity, when working with organisations or training teams, I use violence to mean physical attack, and verbal abuse to mean threatening or insulting behaviour where no physical attack is involved. Verbal abuse is much more common than physical attack, though, of course, most attacks are preceded by verbal abuse.

This is one reason, incidentally, why training should always cover communication and interpersonal skills *before* rushing to involve staff in physical skills training like breakaway techniques, or control and restraint.

Staff understanding of how they can act ethically and legally is paramount. When they know the correct (and legal) course of action to take, and that this is supported by their management, they are more confident and better at handling difficult customers. Knowing the officially sanctioned techniques in the face of any sort of attack, verbal or physical, reduces the fear that they will be reprimanded for acting incorrectly. It also increases decisiveness and confidence.

The legal situation is quite clear, but poorly respected. The Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 and the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999 means that employers must protect their staff. This means assessing the risks and taking active steps to reduce them. Training is part of this, though it should never be used in place of bad practice or poor organisational habits. For example, I regularly hear of staff working alone

where common sense, a risk assessment and management policy say they should always work in pairs.

Other more recent regulations require the recording of all acts of violence, which lead to three or more day's absence from work. In care homes, the 'registered person' must safeguard staff and residents against physical, psychological or sexual abuse.

What to do about it

Employers can do a number of things to reduce the risk of verbal abuse or physical attacks on staff (See box 2). Where the company seriously has the interests of its staff and service users at heart, most of these steps will already be in place since they constitute good management practice. Staff and their representatives can share in this responsibility by doing the following:

- Ensuring rigorous reporting of all incidents of violence and abuse
- Familiarising themselves with organisational policy and procedures, insist on seeing them if necessary
- Asking for support and guidance from managers if needed
- Setting and maintaining clear personal boundaries with regard to 'acceptable' and 'unacceptable' behaviour
- Politely refusing to put themselves at risk (for example lone working) where they feel themselves to be at risk
- Asking for training in areas where they feel under equipped.

The threat of violence in all its forms is a fact of life in many care settings. Contributory factors among service users include their state of physical or mental health, levels of frustration, morale, medication, uncertainty, fear, stress or anxiety. Attacks may be 'involuntary', in the sense that they are the result of the client's condition, or more deliberate and motivated by factors more under the individual's control. Many incidents are undoubtedly not deliberate attempts to harm others, but this makes little difference to the staff member on the receiving end of it. Neither should we automatically draw the conclusion that verbal abuse is somehow less harmful than physical violence. The opposite is often true. Staff find verbal abuse, particularly where it is unexpected from a particular service user, or persistent, is more traumatic and longer lasting than a physical attack in the damage it does.

Critically, good reporting reduces incidents and raises morale. When staff feel supported they act with more confidence and this has an impact on both the incidence and severity of attacks. Training also demonstrates support for staff, while helping them to upgrade their skills. Poorly trained staff are also more

likely to unwittingly provoke or escalate difficult behaviour because they are unaware of how a different approach might help things.

Finally, managers must take a highly visible and pro-active stance in supporting staff against this occupational hazard. There are three steps to this:

- prior information so staff know how to conduct themselves in order to minimise risk
- Rapid and appropriate response in dealing with violent incidents
- Mandatory post-incident support and debriefing, and counselling if and wanted by the staff member.

The right sort of environment (see Box 2) not only benefits staff and service users, it increases productivity, lowers staff turnover and absenteeism and reduces the risk of costly litigation. So there are no losers, only winners.

BOX 1

What is 'violence'? Some take it to mean only physical assault, others include verbal threats and intimidation as well. Multiply this simple example by the number of possible descriptive terms – conflict, violence, aggression, abuse, verbal abuse, threatening /challenging /difficult behaviour, anger, hostility – and you have some idea of the lack of clarity. Training companies regularly receive requests for 'dealing with conflict' to cover anything from disruptive behaviour to outright physical attack. The training provided can range from verbal calming skills to control and restraint.

This confusion can be avoided by first surveying staff to ask what they need, before putting the training package together. This should also be supported by a risk assessment. Training can then be designed to equip staff with the specific skills needed to face the situations they are likely to encounter.

Consider training objectives in terms of what staff will be able to *do* differently as a result, and hold the training provider to it. It is not sufficient to deliver some 'off the shelf' training package which does not directly address staff needs as described by them and with the support of a risk assessment.

BOX 2

What employers can do

- Ensure a positive work culture where a concern for staff welfare demonstrated and valued and where violence and abuse are legitimate topics of conversation

- Ensure that all inappropriate behaviour, whatever its source and whoever the targets, is actively discouraged
- Make sure that there is a clear definition of violence which takes into account severity, perceptions and professional discretion in reporting and dealing with incidents
- Agree the definition of violence with staff, and, where possible service users
- Involve agency staff by making them aware of organisational policy and guidelines, and offering them the same support as that received by other employees.
- Ensure that staff are fully supported in reporting of incidents, including minor ones
- Draw up a clear policy on violence and abuse and clarify what is expected from workers and managers
- Design a simple mechanism for reporting, recording and following-up incidents, to take account of the victim's view, particularly on possible improvements
- Regularly monitor and review procedures on the basis of the incident report system
- Provide easy access to post-incident support and professional counselling for affected staff
- Provide appropriate training on how to minimise the risk (through personal conduct) of violence and abuse, and what steps to take if either should occur, and update it at least annually.
- Provide 'intake training' so that all newcomers, temporary and permanent, are included in the above.

BOX 3

Encourage a culture which respects Immediate support for staff after an incident is essential and highly valued by staff. Evidence from the research indicates that effective support involves:

- Effective communication within the team
- Calling special debriefing meetings (if possible using a facilitator from outside the immediate incident location)
- Availability of counselling support
- Recognition that everyone present may need support

- Including the consequences of violence in training
- The availability of practical advice (about prosecution, insurance claims etc).

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