



AACN Public Policy

Position Statement

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Zero Tolerance for Abuse Issue

Stimulated by the growing severity of the nursing shortage and issues of patient safety, there is renewed emphasis on examining the hospital environment for factors that result in nurses' dissatisfaction and nursing staff turnover. Among serious concerns nurses report as barriers to delivering safe, quality care is the incidence of verbal abuse and disrespectful behavior received from coworkers, peers and colleagues.

Definition

Abuse can take the form of intimidating behaviors such as condescending language, impatience, angry outbursts, reluctance or refusal to answer questions, threatening body language and physical contact. The emotional impact of abusiveness demoralizes people and can leave the victim feeling personally or professionally attacked, devalued, or humiliated. Verbal abuse can be blatant or subtle and consist of communication through words, tone or manner that disparages, intimidates, patronizes, threatens, accuses or disrespects another.

Evidence

Verbal abuse has been found to be a universal experience among healthcare providers with prevalence data finding the occurrence from 80-97%. ⁶

Sixteen percent of nursing turnover was found to be directly related to factors associated with verbal abuse. ¹

Physicians have been recognized as the primary perpetrators of verbal abuse; however they are not the only source. Patients, families, peers, supervisors and other colleagues have demonstrated abusive behaviors as well. ^{3, 6}

Intimidating, abusive behaviors clearly impact patient safety. A survey by the Institute for Safe Medication Practices revealed almost half (49%) of all respondents reported that their experiences with intimidation had altered the way they handle clarifications or questions about medication orders increasing the risk of incorrect interpretation and occurrences of medication errors. ³

Effective processes to prevent, report and deal with abuse are not universally in place in organizations. According to the Institute for Safe Medication Practices out of over 2000 respondents, only 39% felt that their organization dealt effectively with intimidating behavior. ³

Multiple studies have shown that the negative effect of abuse on productivity, morale, nursing care delivery, workload and errors has been shown to be significant. ^{1, 3, 6}

Research confirms evidence-based prevention strategies as well as enforceable zero-tolerance policies can significantly reduce the occurrence of abusive incidents. ^{4, 5}

Summary

The incidence of abuse and intimidating behaviors are not isolated events in the healthcare setting. Studies have shown that verbal abuse and disrespectful behavior significantly impact the workplace by decreasing morale, increasing job dissatisfaction and creating a hostile work climate. When nurses are intimidated about communicating with other team members, quality care is endangered.² Current literature and data suggest that abusiveness will continue unless education programs for skill development are instituted and actions to establish, enforce and measure zero-tolerance policies are implemented. ⁶



Policy Position

Given strong evidence that abusive behaviors in the work environment threaten the delivery of safe, quality care, result in more errors and violate individual rights to personal dignity, integrity and freedom from harm, the American Association of Critical-Care Nurses (AACN) condemns acts of abuse perpetrated by or against any person and demands a zero-tolerance stance on any abuse and disrespect in the workplace.

AACN is committed to the creation and maintenance of work environments that are free from intimidation, threats and abuse and calls for all institutions to implement enforceable policies and programs to prevent and eliminate abusive, disrespectful and non-collaborative behaviors in the workplace.

AACN Calls to Action

For Institutions

All organizations must:

- Adopt and implement clear zero-tolerance policies and procedures for all abusive behavior with multidisciplinary guidelines for reporting, enforcement and progress measurement.
- Encourage employees to promptly report incidents and ensure that no employee who experiences and reports workplace abuse faces reprisal.
- Establish multidisciplinary evidence-based educational interventions to ensure skill development in preventing and responding to abuse. The program should include a system for documenting incidents, procedures to be taken in the event of incidents and forums for open communication between employers and staff.
- Take action following an incident of abusive behavior including disciplining offenders, counseling victims and other employees, providing a follow-up mechanism for analysis of incidents and imposing corrective measures to prevent recurrence of similar incidents.

For Nurses

All nurses must:

- Communicate respectfully, honestly and openly.
- Hold self and each other accountable for unacceptable behavior.
- Seek solutions as a team – investigate and analyze occurrences of abuse just like other incidents such as medication errors.
- Develop a mentoring system among peers, supervisors, physicians and other providers to build on strengths and enhance personal skills.
- Change negative cultures -- establish a standard for collaboration and communication in their unit, develop strategies and skills and share their best practices.
- Participate in multidisciplinary educational committees to develop organizational policies and strategies for abuse prevention.

References

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