

## The Problem of Workplace Violence: A Focus on the Mental Health Sector

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Workplace violence is a global problem; it is common and profoundly problematic, affecting millions of people worldwide (World Health Organization, 2002c). Some roles dramatically increase the likelihood of workers being exposed to violence. Military personnel, for example, face the prospect of violence including death. Police and security forces face similar danger and the experience of trauma in these workers is common. However, the majority of workplace violence research has focused on understanding what has been termed “horizontal violence”, which refers to bullying perpetrated by co-workers. Tragic consequences, including suicide, have resulted from this form of violence and legislation has been enacted to try to prevent its occurrence. The focus of this chapter, however, is on violence experienced by workers within the health care sector, and in particular by those who work in acute mental health services. According to Nordin (1995), violence in the health care sector is common, constituting almost a quarter of all workplace violence. The financial burden caused by workplace violence in the health sector is also large. In its most extreme, this form of violence has dramatic consequences (Lee, Daffern, Ogloff & Martin, 2015) and on average, one Australian health care worker is killed each year (Mayhew & Chappell, 2001).

Violence perpetrated against mental healthcare professionals is different from that which is observed in other workplaces in that it is not usually fellow employees who are violent. Although horizontal violence between staff does occur and violence between patients is common and problematic, in the mental health setting, staff are often assaulted, threatened or otherwise harmed by people they are attempting to care for and treat. The task is to prevent and manage violence while remaining mindful that health-care professionals have a role, to provide assessment, treatment and support recovery.

This chapter begins with a description of the problem of violence in mental health units and some common approaches to preventing and managing violence. The Forensicare model for understanding inpatient aggression is then presented as an example of a service’s attempt to provide a methodology that can structure clinician attempts to identify those factors contributing to aggressive and violent behaviour and to intervene appropriately.

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