

Nursing wounds of workplace assaults

Monitoring impact on healthcare staff



A national policy and inspection team has been set up by the Health and Safety Authority to investigate the impact that the increased number of assaults against nurses and midwives is having within the healthcare setting. The initiative has been in response to a recent lobbying campaign on the issue by the Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation. Derek Nagle reports.

The rising level of verbal and physical assaults on nurses and midwives over the last three years is now a real cause for concern, as figures have shown that the number of incidents totalled 18,185 from January 2020 to December 2023.

However, many assaults are not reported, according to the Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation (INMO), which is cause for even greater concern, because the impact of such assaults may have life-changing consequences for those working at the frontline of the healthcare sector.

The HSE's National Incident Management System (NIMS), which monitors verbal, physical and sexual assaults on staff, was first introduced in 2015 by the State Claims Agency. This requires all incidents to be reported through a centralised national system with the intention of ultimately improving data quality and includes voluntary organisations.

Incidents are categorised based on severity under 'negligible', 'minor', 'moderate' and 'major'. A negligible

incident is categorised as one that has not caused physical or psychological harm, and which does not require treatment. Time off work, therefore, is not deemed necessary in this case.

A 'major' incident is categorised as one which results in severe harm which leads to a period of stay in hospital of more than eight days. In this case time off work for a period of more than six months may be required.

Of the total number of assaults on nurses and midwives between 2020 and 2023 alone, seven were categorised as 'major', 600 'moderate', 1,591 'minor' and the other 15,987 were classed as 'negligible'.

UNREPORTED ASSAULTS

According to a spokesperson for the INMO, the reason that many assaults go unreported is because the statistics only relate to what has been collated by the HSE. "They don't cover the Section 38 organisations which are large voluntary hospitals, psychiatric or a lot of community services where we know the incidents of assault are much higher," she noted.

The INMO believes there is a connection between the increased number of assaults on nursing staff and overcrowded hospitals and poor staffing – if the facility does not have the correct staffing levels or beds this only adds to the pressure. The representative organisation also believes that the employer has a duty to enhance security in our hospitals.



"The HSA provides sector specific information and e-learning programmes on occupational health and safety in health and social care settings" – Dr Adrienne Duff, Assistant Chief Executive of the HSA's Occupational Health Division.

"We must get back to the mentality that security is the hospital's responsibility, and the security staff must be a core part of the overall staff structure and must be placed and/or available in the emergency department. Sometimes, people are looking for security personnel, but they have responsibility for the whole campus and not just one department," the INMO's spokesperson added.

HEALTHCARE PRIORITIES

The Health and Safety Authority (HSA) now has a dedicated national policy and inspection team focusing on the healthcare sector as part of its newly established Occupational Health Division. This is as a result of additional funding in recent years.

Dr Adrienne Duff, Assistant Chief Executive of the HSA's Occupational Health Division, is keen to point out that her organisation has already increased its focus on the health and social care sector.

"The HSA continues to prioritise the health and social care sectors and undertakes a mix of proactive and reactive inspections across the sector as well as providing sector specific information and e-learning programmes on occupational health and safety in health and social care settings," she told 'Emergency Services Ireland'.

The new initiative has been due to a successful lobbying campaign by the INMO. It believes that since the HSA's work has been transformative in the farming and construction sectors, then the Authority has a vital role to play in highlighting the impact that assaults within the healthcare setting have. The INMO now looks forward to strong employee representation in the work of the new Health and Social Care Advisory Committee.

The HSA carried out 510 inspections and investigations in the health and social care sectors in 2022. This resulted in one prohibition notice, 12 improvement notices and 342 written advice notices. Data for 2023 will be available later this year.

EMERGENCY DEPARTMENT INSPECTIONS

The HSA's Health and Social Care Division also carried out inspections in 26 emergency departments in 2023, which covered a range of occupational health and safety issues. Inspections for the coming year will take place in hospitals, nursing homes, residential care facilities and primary care services. They will focus on key risk areas to include work-related violence and aggression.

According to a HSE spokesperson, ensuring the safety of employees and service users is a priority and it is committed to creating a safe environment within which to work. It also continues to emphasise the



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management of work-related aggression and violence. Its areas of focus are a review of the national policy on the management of work-related aggression and violence, risk assessment and training.

"The HSE has long been proactive in encouraging staff to report all incidents and in directing managers to review all incidents. This is enshrined in the HSE Corporate Safety Statement, the HSE Policy on the Prevention and Management of Work-Related Aggression & Violence and the HSE Incident Management Framework and Guidance 2020," he said.

COUNSELLING FOR EMPLOYEES

Under the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act 2005, the HSA's Dr Adrienne Duff pointed out that the legislation "places duties on employers to ensure, as far as is reasonably practicable, employee safety, health and welfare at work".

In her view the main aim of managing violence and aggression at work is to prevent incidents as much as possible and to minimise the consequences of an incident, should one occur.

If a HSE staff member has been the victim of an assault its EAP (Employee Assistance Programme) makes counselling available to that member. This is initially up to six counselling sessions, but the type and length of each session is such dependent on how the staff member has been impacted by the assault so this may also include trauma counselling.

An INMO spokesperson reports on the stark reality that some are forced to face due to workplace attacks. "Certain assaults have unfortunately been career ending for some of our members and many have to deal with the trauma of their assaults for a long period of time after the assault occurred.

"While we know that the levels of hospital overcrowding can lead to a pressurised environment, it is never acceptable to assault a healthcare professional while they are trying their best to provide safe care," she said.



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"ZERO TOLERANCE APPROACH REQUIRED" – INMO

Government moves to increase the maximum penalty for assaulting nurses, midwives and other frontline workers were welcomed by the INMO back in May 2023.

With over ten nurses enduring some kind of physical, verbal or sexual assault in their workplace every day, INMO General Secretary, Phil Ní Sheaghda said that her union very much welcomed the Government's announcement that enacting legislation to increase the sentence for assaulting frontline workers.

"Nurses and midwives need hospital management to use the powers they have and support staff and make complaints to Gardai – a zero tolerance approach is required and that is not the case at present.

"Legislative protection by itself is not enough, the Health and Safety Authority needs to play an enhanced role in tackling assaults of nurses. There must be more inspections, prosecutions of employers who fail to keep staff safe. There must be a dedicated division established within the HSA to deal directly with the health service. This is an ask the INMO has put directly to Government and the Authority itself.

"Hospitals are not just places of care, they are workplaces. We need to know what measures are being put in place to protect a largely female work force. The employer's remit is to provide a safe workplace. Over ten assaults every day is not acceptable." (Source: INOM website, 23 May 2023)

