

Reflections on the Violence Experienced by Nurses in Their Work Environment

Reflexões Sobre a Violência Sofrida Pelos Enfermeiros no Seu Ambiente de Trabalho

Reflexiones Sobre la Violencia Sufrida por los Enfermeros en su Entorno Laboral

RESUMO

Objetivo: Compreender as situações de violência sofridas por enfermeiros em seu espaço de trabalho. **Métodos:** Foi realizada uma revisão narrativa da literatura. As buscas ocorreram no período de novembro a dezembro de 2024, nas bases de dados Biblioteca Virtual em Saúde (BVS), utilizando o seguinte termo de pesquisa: violência no ambiente de trabalho. **Resultados:** Os profissionais de enfermagem vivenciam um ambiente de trabalho onde o desempenho de suas funções, são justamente as mesmas que os expõem a maiores riscos de ser vítima de violência. As evidências científicas apontam diversos tipos de agressões, como ameaças, insultos, agressões físicas e verbais, assédio moral e sexual, frequentemente perpetradas por pacientes, familiares, colegas e gestores, impactando negativamente a saúde mental dos trabalhadores. **Conclusão:** A prevenção da violência no trabalho é essencial para criar um ambiente laboral mais seguro, incluindo políticas institucionais de prevenção, ações gerenciais, intervenções do Ministério Público do Trabalho e projetos de lei.

DESCRIPTORIOS: Violência; Violência no ambiente de trabalho; Enfermeiro, Exposição à violência.

ABSTRACT

Objective: To understand the situations of violence experienced by nurses in their work environment. **Methods:** The narrative literature review. The searches were conducted from November to December 2024 in the Biblioteca Virtual em Saúde (BVS) databases, using the following search term: workplace violence. **Results:** Nursing professionals experience a work environment where the performance of their duties exposes them to greater risks of becoming victims of violence. Scientific evidence points to various types of aggression, such as threats, insults, physical and verbal assaults, moral and sexual harassment, often perpetrated by patients, family members, colleagues, and managers, negatively impacting the mental health of workers. **Conclusion:** Preventing workplace violence is essential to create a safer work environment, including institutional prevention policies, managerial actions, interventions from the Public Labor Ministry, and legislative projects.

DESCRIPTORS: Violence; Workplace violence; Nurse; Exposure to Violence.

RESUMEN

Objetivo: Comprender las situaciones de violencia sufridas por enfermeros en su espacio de trabajo. **Método:** Revisión narrativa de la literatura; las búsquedas se realizaron en el período de noviembre de 2024 a diciembre de 2024, en las bases de datos de la Biblioteca Virtual en Salud (BVS), utilizando el siguiente término de búsqueda: violencia en el ambiente de trabajo. **Resultado:** Los profesionales de enfermería viven en un ambiente de trabajo donde el desempeño de sus funciones es precisamente lo que los expone a mayores riesgos de ser víctimas de violencia. Las evidencias científicas señalan diversos tipos de agresiones, como amenazas, insultos, agresiones físicas y verbales, acoso moral y sexual, frecuentemente perpetradas por pacientes, familiares, colegas y gestores, impactando negativamente la salud mental de los trabajadores. **Conclusión:** La prevención de la violencia en el trabajo es esencial para crear un ambiente laboral más seguro, incluyendo políticas institucionales de prevención, acciones gerenciales, intervenciones del Ministerio Público del Trabajo y proyectos de ley.

DESCRIPTORIOS: Violencia; Violencia Laboral; Enfermeros; Exposición a la Violencia.

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INTRODUCTION

Violence is a public health problem worldwide, defined as the intentional use of force against oneself or others, which results in possible physical injuries, psychological, social and spiritual damage, in the most diverse classes and nations.¹

Among the various forms and types of violence, there is the relationship between work and violence, which becomes tangible through a series of breaches of principles guaranteed by labor legislation.²

Violence is a reality for Workers' Health, so much so that the National Workers' Health and Safety Policy (PNST - *Política Nacional de Segurança e Saúde do Trabalhador*) itself mentions the context of violence, highlighting the deteriorated work relations that culminate in a growing number of episodes of violence in the workplace, manifested by a greater number of work accidents and work-related illnesses.³

The National Network for Comprehensive Care for Workers' Health (*Renast - Rede Nacional de Atenção Integral à Saúde do Trabalhador*) has been implemented as the main strategy of the National Policy for Workers' Health and Safety for the Unified Health System (SUS), and its principle is to develop assistance and health surveillance actions for workers. Among the health problems related to work, it is worth highlighting the increase in aggression and episodes of violence against workers in their workplace, translated into accidents and work-related illnesses; violence

resulting from deteriorated work relations, violence linked to gender relations and moral harassment, characterized by aggression between peers, bosses and subordinates.³

When we contextualize violence in the health environment, violence directed at nursing professionals becomes even more complex, since, in addition to affecting the health of the professional themselves, it can also affect the quality of care provided to patients.⁴ This phenomenon can manifest itself in different ways, including physical, verbal, psychological aggression and even moral harassment.⁵

The highly stressful healthcare environment, the lack of resources and the expectations of users and family members regarding care can directly influence the occurrence of cases of violence.⁶

The different forms of violence need to be considered from the perspective of structural violence found in institutions; these deeply-rooted customs and beliefs guarantee injustices to certain individuals and groups. When we consider violence prevention, we highlight the social and historical context and the local reality of a given society.⁶⁻⁷ In addition to preventing cases of violence, it is essential that, if violence occurs, the victimized worker feels safe reporting the case.

In view of the above, the aim is to understand the situations of violence suffered by nurses in their workplace based on a narrative review of the literature, guided by the question: What are the situations of violence suffered by nurses in the workplace?

The specific objectives are to cite the situations of violence suffered by nurses in the workplace; analyze the contexts that lead to situations of violence in the workplace; describe actions to prevent the occurrence and worsening of situations of violence suffered by nurses in the workplace.

METHODS

The work was prepared using the narrative literature review methodology, with the aim of understanding the situations of violence suffered by nurses in their workplace based on a narrative literature review, in order to support and corroborate the reflection on the topic in question.⁸

A survey was conducted between November 2024 and December 2024 in the Virtual Health Library (VHL) databases, using the following search term: violence in the workplace.

The articles used in the survey should have been published in the last 10 years. The inclusion criteria were articles in Portuguese, as well as articles with full text available.

As exclusion criteria, articles whose title did not address the topic of violence in the workplace were discarded.

The initial search yielded 314 articles, of which 8 were selected after using the filter of nurses as the main subject. In addition to the databases, a free search was simultaneously conducted using the Google Scholar platform, as well as manual searches of the references of the selected literature.

A total of 8 articles were obtained from the VHL database, which were subjected to the application of the

inclusion and exclusion criteria, resulting in seven articles that addressed violence related to nursing. An additional 15 articles were added as a result of the manual searches, totaling 22 articles included.

RESULTS

Contextualized violence in the workplace

Some studies point to violence in the workplace as one of the problems that most afflicts Brazil at the current historical moment.^{2,9}

Violence, in general, has become an everyday occurrence in many ways in our society, including in the lives of workers, which makes this problem a public health issue.¹⁰

Violence is so present in Workers' Health that the National Workers' Health and Safety Policy (PNST) reports on work-related health problems, including the increase in aggression and episodes of violence against workers in their workplace.³

Violence in the workplace experienced by nursing professionals generates anger and suffering for nursing workers, as they consider it contradictory that their work activities are linked to direct care for human beings, and that this very fact puts them at greater exposure to violence.¹¹

Among healthcare workers, nurses are those most exposed to situations of violence, and some factors justify this phenomenon, such as proximity to patients and their families, in addition to providing continuous assistance, due to long periods of service due to shift work, being exposed to direct contact and for a greater amount of time.¹¹⁻¹²

An investigation conducted by the Regional Nursing Council of the State of São Paulo (COREN-SP) revealed, based on reports from 8,332 respondents, that 74% of nursing professionals reported having suffered some type of violence in the workplace. Of

these, 52% reported having been attacked two or more times, and 73% stated that violent incidents occurred frequently in the place where they worked.¹³

Types of workplace-related violence

Scientific evidence identifies some of the types of violence suffered by healthcare workers, including threats, insults, bullying, physical and verbal aggression, moral harassment and sexual harassment. The aggressors are often the patients themselves, as well as their family members, colleagues, managers, external public and members of support sectors or services, generating a direct impact on the mental health of the worker.¹⁴

Although the majority of nursing staff report concerns about violence in the workplace, or have even been victims of some type of violence at work, approximately only a third are aware of the institutional reporting methods for violence.¹⁵

When addressing the types of violence, verbal abuse, despite being the most prevalent, is rarely recorded, and this is due to the lack of encouragement from managers linked to the fear of being persecuted and losing one's job.¹⁵⁻¹⁶

Studies have shown a high incidence of violence, especially verbal violence, directed at nursing workers in a Primary Care Unit.¹⁷⁻¹⁸⁻¹⁹⁻²⁰

The main physical aggressions suffered by nurses are scratches, pinches, kicks, pushes, or injuries with the use of objects or weapons, among others.²¹

Regarding the main aggressor, the users of the services themselves stand out as the main perpetrators of violence.¹⁷

Regarding the form of violence characterized as moral harassment, practices such as isolating, disqualifying, inducing embarrassment and other types of abuse of power perpetrated

by hierarchical superiors are included.¹⁷

We are facing a growing number of cases of sexual harassment in the workplace, such an act can be characterized as verbally or physically embarrassing a person to obtain sexual advantage, in a humiliating, offensive and humiliating manner.²²

The negative impact on the development of nursing workers' work activities due to the suffering of being targets of cases of sexual harassment in the workplace.²¹

Consequences of violence in the development of nursing work

Violence in the form of intimidation against workers causes illness and has a negative impact on the development of their work, although intimidation is considered commonplace and is not only accepted, but also reproduced in the organizational culture of health institutions.²³

It is found that professionals who are exposed to situations of violence are the greatest users of medications for depression, anxiety, high blood pressure, among other pathologies, than those who report not suffering any type of violence in the workplace.¹⁷

Satisfaction with the workplace is statistically linked to not suffering physical violence, proving that workers who identify with a higher level of satisfaction with their work are those who suffer less physical violence.²⁴

The fact of not suffering violence obviously has a positive impact on satisfaction with the work environment, on the feeling of professional recognition and on satisfaction with interpersonal relationships.^{17,24}

Measures to prevent violence in the workplace

Preventing situations of violence at work results in a better work environment, and among the prevention actions, he cites institutional preven-

tion policies, management actions, intervention by the Public Ministry of Labor and Bills.²⁵

Some countries, mainly the United States of America and Europe, establish mandatory policies that advocate zero tolerance towards violence in the workplace, which, in addition to including everyone involved in the prevention program, is based on the premise of encouraging the reporting of cases of violence.²⁶

It is essential that managers commit to and implement institutional strategies to prevent violence in the workplace, with actions planned in line with workplace violence prevention policies, adapted to the reality of each health institution.²⁷

Escalation techniques are presented as one of the possible strategies for preventing violence in the workplace. These techniques work by identifying the phases of the aggression cycle and possible behaviors that can evolve and/or worsen a violent situation.²⁷

“De-escalation” is configured as a range of skills and techniques that avoid or minimize conflict situations, through verbal and non-verbal interventions, assessment of the situation and actions aimed at maintaining safety, reducing the aggressor’s agitation, whatever the cause that triggered the situation of violence.²⁷

DISCUSSION

Based on the data presented, we can discuss the issue of violence in the workplace, especially in the health sector, where nursing professionals are particularly vulnerable. Violence, in its various forms, is a reality faced by these workers, with verbal and physical aggression standing out. The fact that the main aggressors are the patients themselves and their families reveals a complex dynamic, where the pressure and stress of the health environment can manifest itself in aggressive behavior. This not only affects the

mental health of workers, but can also negatively impact the quality of care provided to patients.⁴

Coupled with the fear of reprisals and the lack of an effective reporting channel, there is underreporting of cases of violence in the healthcare sector, a situation that highlights the need for an organizational culture that promotes open communication and support among healthcare professionals.

Practices of disqualification and humiliation by hierarchical superiors, as well as cases of sexual harassment, not only harm the well-being of workers, but also create an unfavorable work environment, which can lead to high turnover and job dissatisfaction.¹⁷

When addressing workplace violence, it is essential that healthcare institutions adopt robust prevention strategies. This includes implementing conflict management training that enables professionals to deal with situations of violence effectively.²⁸

Promoting a safe and respectful environment is essential to the well-being of workers and the quality of patient care.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrated that nurses are exposed to situations of violence in their work environments, especially verbal violence, and that, in most cases, the violence is perpetrated by patients themselves or their families.

In most cases, violence directed at nurses occurs because they are the health professionals who are closest to patients and their families.

The analysis of the situations of violence faced by nurses reveals a scenario that demands attention, since it not only compromises the health and safety of these professionals, but also directly impacts the quality of care provided to patients. The predominance of verbal violence, often per-

petrated by patients or their families, indicates an urgent need for intervention. The proximity of nurses to patients can be seen both as an opportunity for more humanized care and as a factor of vulnerability.

The possibilities for dealing with this include implementing training programs that address conflict management and effective communication, as well as awareness campaigns on the importance of respect and empathy in the healthcare environment. Creating a clear protocol for reporting violent incidents and strengthening psychological support for professionals can contribute to a culture of safety and protection.

By understanding the context surrounding situations of violence directed at nurses and their main causes, we can analyze the forms of dealing with this that are effective in preventing situations of violence directed at nurses in their work environment, since these situations have a direct negative impact on their development and performance at work.

We realize that there is still a need for organization in relation to the violence suffered by nurses, because, due to numerous factors, such as the trivialization of violence, fear of losing one’s job and lack of support from management, reporting is far below the actual cases of violence in the workplace in which nurses are victims. The conclusion must respond to the objectives of the proposed study, as well as be based on evidence found during the investigation in the clearest, most concise and objective manner.

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