

Protecting Emergency Physicians and Health Care Workers from Violence

Violence against emergency physicians, nurses, and other health care workers has long been an occupational hazard in the emergency department (ED). In fact, workers in the health care sector are four times more likely to experience serious workplace violence than those in private industry on average.¹

ED violence causes significant stress and trauma to health care workers and to patients who seek treatment in the ED. According to a survey conducted by the American College of Emergency Physicians (ACEP) in 2018, nearly half of physicians polled reported being physically assaulted, with more than 60% of those assaults occurring within the previous year.² Nearly seven in 10 emergency physicians also said that ED violence had increased over the previous five years.³ Sadly, workplace violence has become an even greater threat over the last several years, exacerbated by the various stresses and challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic.

“Violent or threatening incidents in the emergency department pose risks to everyone’s safety but can also impact health workers’ mental health and may increase the likelihood of burnout. These encounters happen frequently and often go unreported.”

-Lauren Querin, MD, MS
Emergency physician

While emergency physicians are exposed to significant rates of verbal and physical abuse, these rates likely do not represent the full impact of ED violence. There are many challenges in accurately tracking violent incidents, in no small part due to the fact that many health care workers decline to report incidents for fear of retaliation or feelings that reporting is not worth the time. ED violence creates additional stress and contributes to low morale, and it puts health care workers in a challenging position when they must treat the patient who attacked them. Even in cases where law enforcement does make an arrest for violent behavior, the charges are often not pursued by district attorneys and offenders are not prosecuted.

The increased level of violence in our society is perhaps most evident in the rise of unruly, disruptive, and violent behavior by commercial airline passengers against airline employees and other travelers. However, while there are myriad civil and criminal penalties (as well as other potential consequences) for unruly airline passengers that are aggressively pursued, these are lacking for violence against health care workers. Additionally, violence in the ED is also subject to unique considerations, such as federal laws governing patient privacy protections and requiring stabilization of patients with emergency medical conditions—meaning that so many of these incidents go completely unseen by the public.

Violence against emergency physicians and other ED staff must not be accepted as “just part of the job.” ACEP supports the “Workplace Violence Prevention for Health Care and Social Service Workers Act” (H.R. 1195), introduced by Rep. Joe Courtney (D-CT) and soon to be introduced in the Senate by Sen. Tammy Baldwin (D-WI), that takes critical steps to address ED violence by requiring the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) to issue an enforceable standard (that has been under development for years) to ensure health care and social services workplaces implement violence prevention, tracking, and response systems. H.R. 1195 passed the House on April 16, 2021, and we urge the Senate to swiftly consider and pass this important legislation to help protect emergency physicians from violence in the workplace.

Additionally, ACEP urges Congress to examine other potential protections for emergency physicians and work with the administration to implement and enforce appropriate penalties for violence against health care workers. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic where the frontline health care workforce gave their all, we ask legislators to help stem the tide of increased violence in the ED and protect those who provide the health care safety net.

ACEP thanks the House of Representatives for passing the bipartisan “Workplace Violence Prevention for Health Care and Social Service Workers Act,” and urges Senators to cosponsor the bill when introduced and to swiftly take up this legislation to help protect emergency physicians and our colleagues in the emergency department.

¹ [Workplace Violence in Healthcare: Understanding the Challenge](#) (2015) Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA)

^{2,3} [ACEP Emergency Department Violence Poll Research Results, September 2018](#)