HEALTH PROFESSIONALS MUST BE PROTECTED FROM VIOLENCE

...so that they can save lives.
Our communities and health systems suffer every time our health workforce loses a health professional.

BACKGROUND CONTEXT

How big is the problem of violence against health professionals?

The prevalence of violence against health workers is extremely worrying. A study published in 2019 found that 42.5% of health workers reported exposure to non-physical violence (e.g., verbal abuse, threats and sexual harassment) in the workplace, and 24.4% had experienced physical violence in the past year.

Violence against health professionals was found to be particularly high in Asia and North America, in psychiatric and emergency departments, and among nurses and physicians. Another study on violence against oral health professionals found that up to 54% had experienced a violent event between 1992 and 2019.

In addition, evidence gathered during the COVID-19 pandemic points to mounting physical attacks on health professionals.

What are the consequences of violence on health professionals?

Consequences of violence include death or life-threatening injuries and other physical harm, poor mental health, job dissatisfaction, and impaired work and patient safety. Furthermore, incidents of violence can drive health professionals away from their caregiving roles, which increases the gap between the supply of health professionals and the demand for their services, and leaves people with no access to healthcare. If we are to address the global health workforce crisis, we must act quickly to keep our health professionals safe.

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POSITIVE PRACTICE ENVIRONMENTS PROTECT HEALTH PROFESSIONALS FROM VIOLENCE

Causes of violence to health pro-fessionals are reported to include understaffing, insufficient time to communicate with patients, long waiting times, overcrowding in health facilities, emotional or mental stress of patients or visitors, lack of trust in the healthcare system, unrealistic expectations of treatment success, and insufficient security.

Positive practice environments help to address many of these causes.

The World Health Organization has called on governments to protect health professionals from violence. Yet many other stakeholders can also make a difference, including policy makers, professional bodies, regulators, organizations, employers and managers.

"No country, hospital or clinic can keep its patients safe unless it keeps its health workers safe."
— Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Director General, World Health Organization

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ACTIONS TO PROTECT HEALTH PROFESSIONALS AGAINST VIOLENCE

Governments, policy makers, regulators, professional bodies, organizations, employers and managers must:

- **adopt and implement stronger laws, policies and mechanisms** to prevent violence against health professionals, promote a culture of zero tolerance for violence, and hold perpetrators of attacks to account with strong penalties;
- **ensure health professionals are trained** to recognize, handle, and communicate with potentially violent people;
- ensure that healthcare facilities, especially psychiatric and emergency departments, safeguard against violence, which includes conducting routine violence-risk audits;
- **support reporting mechanisms, surveillance, and collection of data on attacks** on health professionals;

- **establish mechanisms** (e.g., ombudspersons and helplines) to enable free and confidential reporting of violence and to support (e.g., medical, psychological, and legal counselling) any health professional facing violence;
- **be attentive** to how health professionals are perceived in order to reduce discrimination and ostracization;
- **facilitate studies** to provide evidence-based recommendations on interventions to reduce violence against health professionals.

Health professionals shouldn't have to face threats or violence.

Let's work together to ensure they're kept safe, healthy, motivated and productive so that they continue to be there for us when we need them.

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