

# Safety Zone: Managing Patient Aggression

Healthcare workers face increased risk of physical injury and exposure to disease when patients behave aggressively. Violent incidents from hostile patients are the main source of workplace violence in a healthcare setting, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) found that 80% of healthcare worker injuries are a result of interactions with aggressive patients. Biting, scratching and spitting are documented transmission routes for HIV, Hepatitis C and other bloodborne illnesses.

## Managing the Risks

Patients can become physically hostile with caregivers for a number of reasons. Most common causes are associated with dementia and cognitive impairment that affects perceptions and reasoning. Other factors impacting patients' temperament may include pain, illness or medications.

Healthcare workers should be especially keen to subtle clues in a patient's demeanor that can signal aggressive behavior. Indicators of anxiety and agitation may include one or a combination of behaviors like pacing, angry facial expressions, tensed limbs and clenched fists. Others are more subtle like heavy breathing, sweating, uncharacteristic eye movements and stuttering.

## Best Practices

Communication with anxious patients and co-workers is critical to assessing and controlling the risks. Letting co-workers know of a patient's disposition to unpredictable, uncooperative and combative behavior and the warning signs leading to hostility are crucial to avoiding incidents that can injure the patient and staff.

The vast majority of a healthcare worker's communication with a patient is non-verbal. Patients are naturally apprehensive of their intent and may react with hostility. That is why the worker's entrance, body language and attitude are essential to alleviating patients' concerns. Entering the room slowly, waking the patient with a friendly greeting, remaining calm and controlling emotions can develop a trusting relationship with the patient and help diffuse anxiety and anger.

Awareness, communication and in-service training among all departments are effective tools in reducing patient aggression and violence. These practices include:

- Documenting a patient's history of aggressive behavior at admission or through staff observations
- Communicating with other workers about warning signs and triggers for specific patients
- Approaching patients slowly and deliberately
- Paying attention to patients' attitudes for indicators

## Contact Info:

PHONE: 888.486.7466

WEB: [www.amtrustfinancial.com](http://www.amtrustfinancial.com)

EMAIL: [AskLC@amtrustgroup.com](mailto:AskLC@amtrustgroup.com)

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- Making sure one provider at a time communicates with a patient to avoid confusion
- Greeting the patient and listening for a response to develop a trusting relationship
- Permitting ample "personal space" or a buffer zone when dealing with anxious patients
- Awareness and removal of everyday items that may be used as weapons when suspecting hostility
- Explaining to patients exactly what you are going to do and why before entering their personal space

Consider these measures when a situation escalates toward violence:

- Attempt to regain control by using calm but assertive verbal commands
- Do not aggravate patients with threatening gestures or verbal tone
- Exit the area and summon assistance if your presence is upsetting a patient
- Communicate your observations and encounters to co-workers and directors of care so that consistent policies can be developed to reduce the likelihood of combative conduct

OSHA provides a guide to understanding the challenges of workplace violence in healthcare on their website at [www.osha.gov/SLTC/etools/hospital/hazards/workplaceviolence/viol.html](http://www.osha.gov/SLTC/etools/hospital/hazards/workplaceviolence/viol.html).

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