

Workplace violence against healthcare workers: an observational study in Castilla y León (Spain)

We have read with interest the article of Firenze et al. (1). We agree that “it is necessary to create awareness to develop both organizational and individual strategies to avoid violence in health organizations.” For this reason, we would like to share our experience in a region in northern Spain.

In recent years, zero tolerance policies towards violence have been implemented in some of the European health systems (2). However, the violence projected towards health workers is a serious health problem at work as some recent studies indicate (2-3), above all of the descriptive type (4).

The public health system of Castilla y León, a region located in the northwest of Spain, assists a population of 2,343,000 inhabitants. It is divided into 11 health areas which include 14 hospitals, 241 health centers and 3,666 local offices (attending to rural health). Around 34,000 people work in all the areas. Our group carried out a retrospective observational study on attacks on health workers in Castilla y León during the 2013-2018 period.

The total number of attacks registered during the study period is 2,594, with an annual average of 432 (SD 74.44); 3,065 professionals were attacked and an annual average of 511 (SD 84.16). The aggression rate per 100,000 inhabitants was 18.19 and an incidence of 15.46 per 10,000 workers/year; for every 100,000 health interventions there were 1.20 accidents.

41.86% of attacks between 2013 and 2018 occurred in primary care, 57.05% in hospitals and 1.07% in health emergencies ($p < 0.05$). The percentage of men attacked was 17.19% and that of women 82.81% ($p < 0.05$). 36.20% of the personnel attacked were doctors, 34.21% were nurses and 29.58% corresponded to other categories of personnel. The typology of aggressions suffered by professionals was 82.48% verbal or psychological and 17.52% physical.

Despite the legislative change included in the new Spanish penal code in 2015 (5), which introduced a new definition of aggression that explicitly reflects that acts of attack will be considered as those committed against health personnel when performing the functions of their positions in the field of public assistance, the results obtained do not allow us to observe a change in the trend of aggressions.

Assaults have serious consequences for the worker, with a global impact in terms of costs, efficiency and effectiveness of health systems, which ultimately influence the quality of care provided to society. In Castilla y León, there is a

strategy to prevent attacks on health professionals (6), and several publicity campaigns have been carried out targeting the population as well as training the workers. However, and after the results shown, we cannot conclude that these plans have been effective.

Occupational health and safety experts must establish synergies with public health professionals and criminology professionals to continue studying, analyzing and disseminating information, in order to reduce all acts of violence against health workers that happen daily, both in hospitals and primary care centers.

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