Keeping health workers safe

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It is a real privilege to be a health professional and to provide care to people when they are at their most vulnerable. As a general rule, the community value and respect the opportunity they have to receive that care. Sadly though, as an emergency physician in one of Queensland’s busiest emergency departments (ED), I witness incidents of violence and aggression and the impact this has on staff and other patients.

I’ve seen clinicians unable to return to work following vicious assaults from patients or visitors in the hospital and I’ve seen patients self discharge from the ED before essential medical care is completed because they fear for their safety due to the volatile environment.

This is not just a problem in our EDs with incidents of violence in mental health facilities, in outpatient clinics and on medical and surgical wards. It is completely unacceptable that 3,000 Queensland healthcare workers report abuse each year. Concerningly, it is well recognised that many more incidents of abuse go unreported.

Healthcare professionals go to work to provide care to patients—they shouldn’t expect to become patients themselves.

We should not have to become experts in self-defence in order to safely deliver care in our hospitals. Every healthcare worker in Queensland should feel safe walking to their car at the end of shift and not worrying about the threat of violence from the relative of the patient they were caring for earlier during the day. It is really pleasing to see that there is a strong investment across Queensland to reduce the incidence of violence and aggression in our healthcare facilities.

Championed by Health Minister Cameron Dick and led by Ken Whelan, Chief Executive for Metro North Hospital and Health Service (MNHHS), the Statewide Occupational Violence Implementation Committee is overseeing the implementation recommendations from the Occupational Violence Prevention Taskforce - http://qheps.health.qld.gov.au/safety/occup_violence/taskforce.htm

Following a recent trial in Metro North, all emergency departments now have permanent security staff embedded within the department, and security officers now are equipped with body worn cameras. These cameras—the same as those used by our colleagues in the Queensland Police Service (QPS)—act as a deterrent for potential violence and assist the QPS to prosecute offenders.

CCTV has been upgraded and expanded across many HHSs and swipe card readers trialled at the Royal Brisbane and Women’s Hospital have now been installed in a number of emergency departments around the state. This technology enables staff to easily and quickly record incidents of violence.

More broadly across Queensland, additional initiatives are underway to tackle the problem including staff training on prevention and response, violence reporting hotlines, greater investment in support for victims of violence. Strong partnerships have been forged with ambulance and police colleagues and a $1.35million public awareness campaign is being rolled out.

We still have a long way to go but there is a commitment at all levels for this work to continue and we are definitely starting to see a difference. Frontline staff are feeling supported. Anecdotally, we’re hearing that the initiatives are working to safeguard our staff and to change community behaviour, and that we’re seeing less violent and aggressive incidents as a result.

At the most recent meeting of the Queensland Clinical Senate, the importance of occupational violence prevention and the need for continued action was reinforced by a series of mock violent incidents based on real life scenarios.

The hypotheticals stimulated great discussion around occupational violence prevention and served as a critical reminder for each of us to take responsibility for promoting the implementation of statewide and local initiatives designed to keep healthcare staff safe.

Occupational violence needs to be recognised and promoted as a ‘clinical issue’ in the same way patient care is. The Queensland Clinical Senate commends the leadership provided by the Queensland Government and Occupational Violence Prevention Implementation Committee to address violence in the workplace.