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Review Article

Violence Against Healthcare Professionals in The Emergency Department in Nigeria: A Review of Pattern and Aetiology

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ABSTRACT

Background: Workplace violence is commonly experienced by healthcare professionals. Healthcare professionals of different categories and cadres can be victims of violence in the workplace although some medical specialties are more predisposed to violence. The objective of this review is to investigate workplace violence in the emergency units of Nigerian hospitals. **Method:** This is a review article on violence against healthcare professionals in the emergency department in Nigeria. A literature search was done using Google Scholar, PubMed, Ajol and Medline. **Result:** Several studies have been conducted on violence against healthcare professionals. Violence against healthcare professionals in the emergency department in Nigeria is common and there are several factors responsible for it. Overcrowding in the emergency department can lead to long waiting times which makes patients impatient and agitated, angry and may want to assault the healthcare professionals. **Conclusion:** In the emergency departments in Nigeria, healthcare professionals are susceptible to violence from patients and caregivers. This comes in the form of verbal abuse, psychological abuse, and physical assault.

INTRODUCTION

Employees experience violence at their workplace especially those who are service providers such as healthcare professionals, law enforcement agents, teachers, air hosts and hostesses. Workplace violence can be defined as an act of threat that occurs at the workplace and it can be verbal, non-verbal, written or physical threats.¹

In Nigeria, workplace violence is a frequent occurrence.² Death can also result from any form of violence. Violence experienced by employees at their workplaces constitutes a public concern³ Workplace violence is now becoming a global concern. It has become a problem affecting the healthcare sector in various countries and continents, thereby affecting the services that are being rendered.³ Results of various research on

workplace violence have shown that the health sector is the worst hit by this menace globally.^{4,5} There is no exemption as any category of a healthcare professional can be a victim of workplace violence.⁶ Healthcare professionals who directly provide clinical care for patients are the worst affected.^{2,7} Some units and medical specialties are more exposed to violence from clients and patients than others. The emergency unit, psychiatry unit, primary care physicians and doctors that work in the outpatient department are more likely to be victims of workplace violence.⁴ Some of the reasons why healthcare professionals who work in the accident and emergency unit are constant victims of workplace violence, especially emergency physicians and nurses are long waiting hours for patients, the congested nature of the emergency unit, and anxiety among patient and their relatives.⁸⁻¹⁰

Employees of the emergency and psychiatry departments have constantly been slandered and beaten by the patients they care for.¹¹

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Among the different categories of healthcare professionals, nurses are the worst affected.³ Healthcare professionals who work the night shift experience violence more at their workplace because most of the healthcare professionals who work the night shift are usually of the lower cadre.¹² From various studies, the prevalence of workplace violence was 59.7% in the emergency unit of an Egyptian hospital⁸, 69.4% in two hospitals in southwestern Nigeria⁶, 70.54% in a study conducted in five health facilities in southern Malawi¹³, and 48.7% in a study conducted among pharmacists in Nigeria.¹⁴

Some of the causes of violence at the medical work in the emergency unit are long waiting times before being attended to, aggressors demand not being met, poor communication techniques, access to firearms, overcrowding in the emergency unit, night shift, working alone, the female gender, unmet expectations and anxiety of the patient and their caregivers/relative and lack of policies and strategies against workplace violence.^{4,8-10,14-16}

Some of the types of violence healthcare professionals experience in the course of their work are verbal abuse, intimidation, emotional abuse, sexual abuse assault and harassment, physical abuse, attacks with weapons, robbery and damage to personal property.¹⁶ All the effects of workplace violence are negative. Some of these effects are poor morale, absenteeism, poor quality of the service rendered⁸, constant request for sick leave, reduced motivation, productivity and satisfaction^{3,5,7,10} and poor work performance.¹³

Workplace Violence in the Emergency Department

Physical and Verbal assault are common experiences of medical professionals working in the emergency departments.^{8,12,17} Violence against medical professionals has affected the morale and workplace environment of frontline medical staff working in busy emergency departments. The emergency room attends to patients that need urgent medical care.¹⁸ The emergency unit is one of the hot spots in which its staff - both medical and non-medical - are victims of violence.^{12,19} The perpetrators of this violence are the patients, patients' caregivers and relatives, and sometimes fellow healthcare professionals.¹²

In the medical workplace, workplace violence is common in the emergency rooms⁸. Workplace violence includes threats, intimidation, harassment, humiliation, bullying, and sabotage, perpetrated against staff in a healthcare setting^{12,17} which impacts the quality of healthcare delivered.⁸

It is not only the healthcare professionals in the emergency unit that encounter violence while at work, even non-clinical staff working in the emergency unit can be victims of workplace violence.¹² Workplace violence is common in all workplaces and it occurs more in healthcare settings and sometimes it is not reported.⁴ Globally it has been found that violence in the emergency unit is common and sometimes difficult to resolve even when measures are taken to end it.⁹ This may be because patients who come to the emergency unit are acutely ill and need urgent attention.^{12,19}

The patients and their caregivers/relatives may be anxious. Some of the patients are injured and some may have a psychiatric and mental illness that can make them aggressive and violent towards the healthcare professional attending to them.¹⁹

A survey conducted by the American College of Emergency Physicians showed that about 50% of emergency physicians have been victims of workplace violence.¹ An Egyptian study on workplace violence in the emergency revealed that 30.6% of the respondents experienced physical violence, 76.5% experienced verbal abuse while sexual violence was reported in 4.7%.¹² Some of the respondents (28.8%) experienced multiple types of violence at their workplace. The majority (85.6%) of the perpetrators of this violence were relatives of the patient. About half (50%) of the perpetrators of the sexual violence were strangers to the hospital. Having a vacation after an assault was required by about 25% of the respondents, while 6.9% of the respondents who were verbally abused by their patients and relatives requested some time off work.¹²

Another study conducted in the emergency department of a hospital in Egypt showed that half of the respondents (59.7%) were victims of workplace violence, and 15.7% of the respondents had experienced physical violence.⁸ The commonest cause of workplace violence was the long waiting time and high expectations of the patients and caregivers. The victims of verbal abuse (29.5%) and physical violence (23.8%) noted that it was possible to prevent it. When the incident was reported to the hospital management, 60% believed that nothing would be done to the perpetrator of the violence.⁸ Violence against healthcare professionals were experienced by 65.7% of nurses, 43.3% of physicians and 71.4% of co-workers. Verbal abuse was commonly (60.3%) perpetrated during the evening shift and 61.9% of physical attacks occurred more during the night shift.⁸

A study on workplace violence among the staff of the emergency unit in Gondar City, Ethiopia

on victims of workplace violence in the past year showed a prevalence of 58.2%.²⁰ Verbal abuse was experienced by 53.1% of the research participants, physical attack by 22.0% and sexual harassment was experienced by 7.2% of research participants. Some of the research participants experienced more than one form of abuse which included verbal, physical abuse and sexual harassment. A third of the research participants (37.9%) observed a colleague being physically assaulted.²⁰

This review article investigates workplace violence in the emergency unit in Nigerian hospitals. It reviews the prevalence, perpetrators and causes of violence against healthcare professionals in the emergency department in health facilities in Nigeria.

METHODOLOGY

This is a review article on violence against healthcare professionals in emergency rooms in Nigeria. The emergency room in most Nigerian Hospitals is known as the Department of Accident and Emergency and in some others, it is called the Casualty Department. The primary Health Facilities in Nigeria may sometimes have a single emergency room that attends to both adult and paediatric emergencies.

The literature search first retrieved 100 articles which include original articles, reviews, systematic reviews and meta-analyses. Only the articles that included violence against healthcare professionals in the Accident and Emergency department in Nigeria were included in the study. These healthcare professionals can either be nurses or doctors. Studies conducted amongst healthcare professionals in Nigeria but did not include healthcare professionals working in the emergency room were excluded in this review. Also, studies on violence against healthcare professionals in the emergency room outside the shores of Nigeria were excluded from the review.

A literature search was done using the databases of Google Scholar, PubMed, and Ajol. The keywords used for the search are violence, healthcare, workers, professionals, Nigeria, workplace, emergency, physicians, workplace, and nurses.

RESULTS

Three studies were identified following the literature search that was relevant to this review. One study was conducted amongst emergency

nurses in the emergency unit while the other two studies were conducted amongst various cadres of healthcare professionals in various departments and units in the hospital including the Department of Accident and Emergency.

One study investigated violence against health professionals in a southwestern city. The prevalence of violence against the staff in the emergency unit was 66.1%. The study population were nurses. The perpetrators of the violence were patients in 46.1% of cases and relatives of the patients in 49.5% of cases.⁶

Another study investigated workplace violence against nurses in the emergency unit. Six tertiary health facilities in Nigeria namely University Teaching Hospital, Ado-Ekiti, Ekiti State (UTH, Ado); Federal Medical Centre, Owo, Ondo State (FMC, Owo); Federal Medical Centre, Ido-Ekiti, Ekiti State (FMC, Ido); State Specialist Hospital, Yola, Adamawa State (SSH, Yola); Federal Medical Centre, Lokoja, Kogi State (FMG, Lokoja) and the University of Ilorin Teaching Hospital, Ilorin, Kwara State (UITH) were studied. Nurses were the most common victims of workplace violence followed by emergency physicians. Whilst 88.6% of healthcare professionals witnessed violence perpetuated against a colleague, 65.0% of them have been victims themselves. The perpetrators of these violent acts were men who utilized various weapons in 15.8% of cases. The causes of violence were overcrowding, long waiting times and inadequate security in the emergency unit.¹¹

A study conducted in Yenegoa Local Government Area in Bayelsa State, South-South Nigeria amongst doctors and nurses revealed that workplace violence was encountered in 60.8% of medical staff in emergency units in the public hospital and 76.3% of emergency doctors and nurses in private hospitals. Verbal abuse was the common type of abuse. The respondents stated that the clinical staff of the emergency unit experienced verbal abuse more than doctors and nurses in other departments.²¹

Table 1 shows violence in the emergency department of the three studies included in this review highlighting the authors, the year the study was conducted, the population of the study and a summary of the study results.

Table I: Violence in the emergency departments of Nigerian Hospitals

S/N	Authors	Population	Number (N)	Result
1	Ogundipe et al, 2013 ¹¹	Emergency nurses in 6 hospitals	81	88.6% witnessed violence perpetrated on another healthcare professional, 65.0% were victims of workplace violence, 15.8% of perpetrators used weapons
2	Abodunrin et al, 2019 ⁶	Different categories of healthcare professionals in different departments in two hospitals	242	30.6% were victims
3	Uzobo et al, 2020 ²¹	Nurses and doctors in public and private hospitals in Yenagoa Local Government Area, Bayelsa State	154 Nurse-65 Doctors-89	Victims of violence while at work <input type="checkbox"/> 60.8% of public hospitals <input type="checkbox"/> 76.3 % of private hospitals

DISCUSSION

Violence is a problem in the workplace and is common among service providers including healthcare professionals. The emergency unit is one of the medical units in which its staff are victims of violence from their patients and/or their relatives. Long waiting times can make a patient anxious leading to aggressive and violent behaviour. In this review, the staff of the emergency unit was exposed to various forms of violence especially verbal and physical abuse from the people they are rendering medical care to.

The causes of assault on clinical staff in the Bayelsa State study were attributed to the acute pain and agony experienced by patients in the emergency department.²¹ This is similar to a study conducted in Federal Teaching Hospital, Ido-Ekiti where the prevalence of workplace violence was highest amongst medical staff in the emergency unit, intensive care unit and Paediatrics compared to medical staff in other departments.²² The results of this review show that the type of health facility does not matter as health professionals working in the emergency department of both public and private hospitals can be victims of workplace violence.

There are other Nigerian studies on violence against healthcare professionals not conducted in the emergency department. For instance, a study conducted on workplace violence among doctors and nurses at a tertiary hospital in Enugu, Southeastern Nigeria showed a prevalence of physical violence of 12.6%. The relatives of the patients were the perpetrators in 71.2% of cases while the patients were perpetrators in 15-4% of cases.⁴ The prevalence of workplace violence among nurses and doctors was 15.3% and 5.4% respectively. Another study was conducted in Osun State, southwest Nigeria on workplace violence against nurses. The majority (79.1%) of the violence occurred during the night shift. The most common

type (60.7%) of violence experienced was verbal abuse.³ A common type of verbal abuse was threatening staff providing clinical care.

This is similar to the results of this review where the two studies conducted solely in the emergency department, more than 50% of the respondents have been victims of workplace violence. The majority (80%) of respondents in this survey noted that workplace violence in the emergency department harms the healthcare professional, therefore, it is a thing of concern.¹

The emergency unit should therefore receive adequate attention to protect its staff. This is because medical workplace violence negatively impacts the emergency staff. More studies need to be conducted on workplace violence in the emergency departments in Nigeria.

Recommendations

The key solution to ending violence in the emergency department is to address the causes. There must be regular workplace assessments, monitoring, education and training, including response plans to tackle this menace of violence against both non-medical and medical staff in the emergency unit and psychological support should be made accessible to staff in the emergency unit to enable them to handle the various effects of workplace violence, especially its mental impact.

Limitation

The studies reviewed did not investigate the impact of workplace violence.

CONCLUSION

The perpetrators of the violence are patients and their caregivers/relatives. Some of the causes of violence in the emergency unit are long waiting times, overcrowding, anxious patient and their family members and sometimes limited bed space. This is a problem in Nigerian Hospitals.

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