

ASHP 2010 Summer Meeting

ESTIMATED UNITED STATES INCIDENCE OF PHYSICAL ASSAULTS PERPETRATED BY AGITATED ADULT PATIENTS WITH SCHIZOPHRENIA OR BIPOLAR DISORDER ON NURSES AND PHYSICIANS IN THE GENERAL EMERGENCY DEPARTMENT

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Purpose: Psychiatric patients, in particular those diagnosed with schizophrenia or bipolar mania, often arrive at United States (U.S.) emergency departments (EDs) in an agitated state that may escalate to physical assault of health care staff. The true incidence of such assaults is difficult to determine, given staff tendencies toward under-reporting, and variations in study design, time frames for evaluation, and definitions of agitated and assaultive behaviors. We sought to estimate U.S. annual incidence of assaults on general ED nurses and physicians that is perpetrated by agitated adult patients with schizophrenia or bipolar disorder, based upon a systematic review of the literature of reported staff assaults and rates of under-reporting in the ED.

Methods: A search of Medline from 1966 to January 2010 and the Internet identified published reports of U.S. rates of agitation, aggression, or violence in EDs, or proportion of ED staff who reported experiencing adverse outcomes associated with patient agitation (e.g., physical injury). Medical Subject Heading (MeSH) search terms were (“Emergency Services, Hospital” OR “Emergency Medicine” OR “Emergency Nursing”) AND (“Psychomotor Agitation” OR “Aggression” OR “Violence” NOT “Domestic Violence”). “True” annual incidence was calculated as the average annualized number of reported physical assault cases divided by the percent of estimated reported actual incidence represented by these cases. Physical assault was defined as being hit, slapped, kicked, pushed, choked, grabbed, sexually assaulted, or otherwise subjected to physical contact intended to injure or harm.

Results: Twenty-two articles that examined rates of agitation in the general ED were identified. Methods of assessment included: staff surveys (16 studies), staff focus groups (1), retrospective analyses of staff administrative reports or police logs (4), and prospective observations (1). On average, ED nurses (N=31,905) and physicians (N=17,000) each reported 2.75 and 3.4 annual physical assaults (total 145,539) perpetrated by patients. According to staff surveys, approximately 65% of actual assaults upon staff were unreported. The “true” annual incidence of assaults on ED staff perpetrated by patients with schizophrenia or bipolar disorder appears to exceed 415,000 [$31,905 \times (2.75/35\%) + [17,000 \times (3.4/35\%)]$]. On average, 1.5 work days are lost by staff following patient assault at an annual cost of \$444.4 million (based on hourly pay rates for nurses and doctors of \$41 and \$162, respectively). Conclusion: The effect of patient assaults upon health care staff extend beyond physical injury to include sustained psychological distress, increased absenteeism, decrements in job performance, and higher rates of staff turnover.