
Letter to the Editor

AN APPROACH TO THE PROBLEM OF VIOLENCE AGAINST HEALTHCARE WORKERS: THE RIGHT TO SAFE AND HEALTHY WORKING CONDITIONS AND TO DIGNITY AT WORK

Dear Editor,

In recent years, there has been a significant increase in the incidence of violence against healthcare workers. More than half of the healthcare workers are exposed to workplace violence annually (Martino 2002). Many studies on violence against healthcare workers in Turkey have reported similar findings (Özcan and Bilgin 2011, Annagür 2010). We are aware of the fact that violence against healthcare workers is quite common and negatively affects not only their professional, but also their private lives.

What is needed is a better understanding of the causes and dynamics of violence against healthcare workers. In addition, we need to consider that the existing literature on this subject, *“does not address macro level factors of workplace violence, such as inadequate staffing, or pressure from management for workers to place patient satisfaction before their own safety, lack of health insurance, and poor access to health care among patients”* (Pompeii et al. 2013).

The point which I would like to draw your and your readers' attention to is related with the kind of violence that may

be regarded as, *“the nature of the job,”* by healthcare workers (Gerberich et al. 2004) and perceived as, *“a problem between doctor and patient,”* and the ensuing results that may be caused by such perceptions. It is possible that this perception has been adopted by the judicial system, based on its handling of relevant cases. At the same time, as the judicial system seems to pursue only criminal charges against patients that attack healthcare workers and does not hold institutions responsible for such violence in any way, strengthens the perception that the problem is solely between doctor and patient. Additionally, it may be assumed that it caused a conceptual turmoil related to who are responsible and liable for this situation. Yet, an act of violence perpetrated by a patient against a healthcare worker must not be treated as an ordinary act of violence, because such violence is occurring either inside the workplace (such as a hospital, doctor's office, healthcare center, ambulance) or outside the workplace and should be deemed *“workplace violence”* and a problem of occupational health and safety. In this respect, I am of the opinion that such violence must be handled in accordance with the fundamental principles, values, and legal regulations regarding occupational health and safety.

The International Labour Organization (ILO) (2002) defines workplace violence as, *“incidents where staff are abused, threatened, or assaulted in circumstances related to their work, involving an explicit or implicit challenge to their safety, well being, or health”*. Here, we consider that the connection between the act of violence and work is explicitly indicated, and threatening to health and safety is underlined. Turkish Occupational Health and Safety Law (2012) define occupational accident as, *“any occurrence taking place in the workplace or due to the*

performance of work, which leads to death, or physical and mental impairment". Accordingly, threats, abuse, and assaults against healthcare workers are included within the scope of that definition, both in terms of their occurrence and results.

The responsibility of employers for the health and safety of employees is stipulated by ILO Occupational Safety and Health Convention C155 (1981), which was ratified by Turkey in 2004, Turkish Labour Law (2003), and Turkish Occupational Health and Safety Law. Working with dignity in a healthy and safe environment is accepted to be the right of all employees, which all countries included in the European Social Charter (1996) (ratified by Turkey in 2007) agreed to guarantee. It must be highlighted that protection of employees from incidents in which they are abused, threatened, or assaulted related to their work is included within this scope. Responsibility and liability of governments and employers are emphasized in order to prevent violence against healthcare workers by identifying all of these national and international regulations on workplace violence.

Since it is accepted that healthcare workers deserve the right to work in healthy and safe environments, without being exposed to any type of violence, then governments and employers are expected to guarantee such a right. The fundamental approach used in occupational health and safety practices will also be valid in this case; the priority must be given to enacted measures to prevent the occurrence of workplace violence, and to identify, assess, and control the risk of such violence. In addition, when violence against healthcare workers is addressed within the scope of occupational health and safety, and its prevention is approached within the framework of the right to work in healthy and safe environments, the perception of "*a problem between both parties*" will change,

emphasizing the importance of this situation in a categorical manner.

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