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News

How can GPs best support receptionists facing the epidemic of patient abuse?

Receptionists deserved evidence-based measures to protect them, say Queensland researchers.



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Post-incident support for GP receptionists can significantly reduce the emotional toll of the growing workplace violence they are facing from patients, a new review suggests.

Australian researchers assessed 20 studies dating back 40 years exploring the abuse directed at frontline staff, revealing that patient aggression has become so frequent, it was now accepted as a normal workplace hazard.

Staff reported being called “dumb” and “lazy”, being subjected to shouting, screaming, cursing, racist language and sexist insults as well as accusations of malicious behaviour.

Lead researcher Dr Fiona Willer (PhD) from the University of Queensland said common triggers for abusive behaviour identified in the studies included frustrations with appointment scheduling, mistakes, delayed access to doctors and prescription refusal.

Her review said several strategies to tackle abuse appeared to help, such as reducing points of frustration for patients like simplifying appointment scheduling.

One study also found that public messages suggesting injunctive consequences (eg, 'hostility can be subject to criminal penalties') were more effective in preventing hostility compared with descriptive messages (eg, 'please be mindful of your words and actions').

But while visible safety measures such as clear acrylic barriers and lockable doors at reception areas made staff feel safer, it also fuelled their concerns about the risk of abuse and violence.

"[However, there was evidence that the] availability of post-incident support (debriefs, external counselling) affected how safe staff felt at work and significantly moderated the effects of workplace violence on emotional wellbeing and physical health," the researchers wrote in *BMJ's Family Medicine and Community Health*.

They said the apparent reliance of GP clinics on receptionists to "develop their own de-escalation strategies and independently build resilience" against patient aggression was concerning.

"Several studies mentioned that part of a receptionist's role, either formally or informally, is to engage with patients positively despite circumstances, de-escalate challenging situations, keep patients calm and maintain composure.

"Studies from hospitality literature describe that good client rapport reduces instances of client misbehaviour, yet prioritising this as a de-escalation tool is ineffective long term and actually led to clients misusing their rights later."

They said receptionists in general practice deserved evidence-based measures to improve their working conditions and wellbeing for their own benefit and that of the community.

"Staff training and protocols to manage patient aggression, and ongoing structured staff support should be considered essential in general practice.

"Evidence-based strategies to prevent, manage and mitigate the harms of patient aggression towards general practice reception staff are urgently needed."

Read more:

- [GP receptionists quit as patient abuse worsens](#)
- [‘We’ve banned a lot of patients’: GP on new levels of abuse faced by her staff](#)

More information: [Fam Med Community Health 2023](#); 6 Jul.

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