



Sexual Harassment Is an Ongoing Threat to Your Staff

■ ROMA B. PATEL

Picture a busy day in an urgent care center. The waiting room chairs are lined with a few frequent fliers, a child in need of a sports physical, and several new patients. As your staff focus on patient intake and managing clinical flow, a patient “playfully” grabs the nurse’s breast, grazes a PA’s groin, or “compliments” the medical assistant on her attractive figure.

Amidst the hustle of triage, diagnostics, abatement and treatment, this offensive behavior may go unseen by staff members and even unacknowledged by the recipient of the action. Whether he or she ever mentions it, the healthcare worker will certainly notice the dehumanizing act and may suffer as a result.

Sexual harassment in healthcare has always been a problem. The *New England Journal of Medicine* reported that 75% of female doctors had experienced sexual harassment in the workplace.¹ Separately, a *Medscape* poll reported that 71% of nurses have been the targets of sexually harassment specifically from patients.² The growth of the healthcare industry means this problem will only grow, unless serious leadership, organizational, and most importantly, significant cultural shifts take place in the minds of the individuals working within this system. While sexual harassment and abuse affects both men and women, we must recognize the historical role that violence against women plays in the context of modern workplace harassment—especially in healthcare settings.

Until recently, we have lived in a world where men have (or are expected to have) some sort of power or status over women. However, traditional notions that men are intellectually superior or more professionally competent are quickly being debunked now that women are gaining access to economic stability in their own right. The resulting increase in competition from women for jobs, along with more balanced autonomy and decision-making among genders, may threaten

some—causing retaliation in various forms.

This is a problem in urgent care, just as it is in the wider healthcare industry. The toll of sexual harassment or unwanted sexual attention in the workplace can be severely debilitating. Repeated and unaddressed sexual harassment can lead to feelings of anger, fear, embarrassment, and deep resentment. For workers who are already battling the variety of external stressors that are commonplace in the healthcare industry, the added pressure of having to numb or compartmentalize harassment on the job can compound into symptoms associated with post-traumatic stress disorder, which can severely inhibit a healthcare worker from feeling confident in performing their duties.

Tackling this problem in healthcare is especially difficult because professionals choosing a career in patient care often aim to put the needs of others before themselves, making them particularly vulnerable to abuse. In fact, Congress has recently recognized the need to address workplace violence against healthcare workers by introducing the Health Care Workplace Violence Prevention Act into the House of Representatives.³ This bill, if passed, will require certain healthcare employers to adopt a comprehensive plan for protecting healthcare workers and other personnel from workplace violence.

It is essential to have a zero-tolerance policy in your urgent care center, one that is both visible to staff and patients and consistently enforced. Creating and maintaining an environment where team members feel safe to report harassment because they know it will be addressed properly, regardless of who the perpetrator is, benefits every person, whether provider or patient, who walks through your center’s doors. ■

[Editor’s note: For an analysis of this topic from a legal perspective, read #MeToo in the Urgent Care Center: When the Perpetrator Is a Patient by Suzanne C. Jones and Roma B. Patel on page 29 of this issue.]

References

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Roma B. Patel is an Associate with Buchalter, a law firm in Los Angeles.