

## Éditorial/Editorial

As I embark on a new journey as a university professor, I am once again confronted to the issue of workplace violence and aggression. Once a faceless taboo, there is now a plethora of articles written on the problem which is so pervasive in health care, and especially in nursing. It is said that health care professionals are 16 times more likely to experience violence at work compared to other workers; and that nurses are the second highest profession for risk of violence and aggression, right next to police officers who are first. This reality is in stark contrast with the caring aspect of nursing which is the reason why many decided to join the profession.

Perpetrators of workplace violence in health care are numerous and include patients and their relatives, managers and supervisors, colleagues and other health care professionals. Aggression can take many forms, from overt physical violence to the more subtle psychological aggression and the often elusive incivility. Instances of aggression are often not reported because the victim is either afraid of retaliation (mostly in instances of intra/inter professional aggression) or perceive an ethical dilemma with reporting someone they are hired to deliver care to (in case of a patient or relative).

Some have argued that acts of aggression must be intentional to qualify as such. However, I have witnessed and been told stories about instances where perpetrators did not realize they were in fact perceived as being abusive. The current workforce diversity where several cultures and generations are now working together can contribute to the perception of aggression. In effect, it is easy to attribute ill intentions to people we do not know or do not understand. Compounded by a shortage of nurses, heavy workloads and increased patient acuity, the work environment of nurses working in hospitals is extremely demanding. There is no time for breaks, meals, to get to know your colleagues, to develop friendships. Instead of being encouraged to do so, nurses who choose to take a break are often perceived as “not busy”, as “having time on their hands”, as “not dedicated to their patients” or even as “lazy”. One can be ostracized just for needing to take a break away from the demands of a busy day.

As an occupational health nurse working in a hospital setting for many years, I was always taken aback by the prevalence of cases of aggression. Talking with employees who were dissatisfied at work, suffering from burnout, contemplating leaving the organization or even nursing

altogether, I was shocked to realize how often these feelings were the results of workplace conflicts or aggression. In my new position as a university professor, I am now confronted with the reality that violence and aggression are both well and alive in the academic world where students and faculty play an integral part in “the dance of incivility”. The academic world is a very demanding one for students and faculty alike. It is a highly competitive environment where students need high grades to access programs and funding, and where faculty require extensive curriculum vitae to access promotions and funding. The need to perform “at all cost” can lead to stressful situations which are fertile grounds for conflicts and aggression to thrive.

I am often asked if I think violence and aggression are more prevalent in today’s world. On the one hand, I believe that we see an increase in reported cases of violence and aggression because more people are aware of the issue and encouraged to report it thus leading to an increase in “reported” cases but not necessarily “new” cases per say (as some cases might have happened before but we were not aware of them). On the other hand, I would argue that today’s society appear to be more violent than it was even just a couple of generations ago. Whether we think of bullying in the school yards of elementary schools or hallways of high schools; of soccer or hockey coaches and referees being attacked by parents; of bus drivers being cursed, spat on or punched; of taxi drivers being robbed and beaten; of road rage; of the multiple law suits against institutions, neighbours, colleagues, family members... Yes, I do believe that as a society, we have become a lot less tolerant and civil towards one another. I recently went shopping at a local grocery store and next to the cashier was a sign “do not spit on cashier”. When I asked the cashier about the prevalence of this behaviour she replied “more often than you would think”. This reminded me that we all have a role to play if we are to address violence in the workplace and in society in general.

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