Prevention of occupational violence

Occupational violence has been defined as "incidents where staff are abused, threatened or assaulted in circumstances related to their work, including commuting to and from work, involving the explicit or implicit challenge to their safety, wellbeing or health." In the previous issue of this series (no. 9), the three major types of occupational violence were described (external, client-initiated, and internal organisational). Here, measures for the prevention of occupational violence are summarised.

The most effective policies and strategies for preventing and reducing occupational violence are pre-planned, multifaceted and organisation-wide. Specific solutions must be tailored to specific workplace settings and must be developed and implemented collaboratively between employers and workers. Responses must be based on a hierarchy of preferred actions starting with the elimination of potential hazards through workplace redesign. They must also include the modification of work practices to reduce potential exposure to and risk from workplace violence, the application of administrative controls (such as training and warning signs), and the institution of regular and comprehensive organisation-wide violence vulnerability audits.

A comprehensive occupational violence prevention strategy has three parts:

- **Reducing risks through structural change** involves the application of CPTED principles to the work environment, and may include target hardening (for example, duress alarms, screens and access controls), increasing the risk of detection and capture (for example, by improved visibility and passive surveillance), and the redesign and relocation of office equipment and facilities.

- **Reducing risks through administrative controls**, such as the adoption of a policy of zero tolerance for workplace violence, and the establishment of risk-control strategies such as regular violence vulnerability audits and emergency response teams. Central to this is the collection of accurate and comprehensive data on the incidence and outcomes of violent events as well as the establishment of lists of high-risk clients and customers. Similarly, it is important that clients and customers are fully aware of the organisation's policies and practices in response to aggressive or violent behaviour.

- **Communicating strategies to staff**, which involves effectively disseminating policies and practices throughout the organisation (including updates). Training is also important but should focus on preventive rather than reactive skills. Effective post-incident support is also critical for maintaining staff commitment.

Finally, as with any organisational management strategy, a policy for ongoing evaluation and review is essential to ensue that practices are kept up to date and effective.

Further reading:

Mayhew, C. 2003, "Occupational violence and prevention strategies", *Master OHS and Environment Guide*, CCH Australia, North Ryde, pp. 547–69.

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