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## SPECIAL ARTICLE

# A protocol to prevent and deal with aggressive behaviour against health workers<sup>☆</sup>

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### KEYWORDS

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**Abstract** Violence against health workers is a highly prevalent phenomenon with serious psychological and labour consequences among professionals. This paper aims, first, to find out the main studies undertaken to date to describe and analyse the phenomenon, as well as to present different initiatives and protocols of action carried out. The second objective is to offer a procedure of action both to prevent aggression and to intervene in the event of receiving an aggression at work. After a bibliographic search in PubMed, Scopus and SciELO databases, the impact of the aggressions suffered by health professionals, the contexts in which aggressions are more frequent, their main consequences and different strategies and protocols conducted in Spain are reviewed. Given that rigorous reviews supporting such procedures are lacking in scientific journals, different action guidelines for professionals to prevent and to deal with hostile behaviour based on available evidence are developed and proposed. Finally, an easily consultable and applicable action procedure for health workers attacked in the workplace is presented.

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**PALABRAS CLAVE**

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**Protocolo de actuación para prevenir y afrontar agresiones al personal sanitario**

**Resumen** La violencia contra el personal sanitario es una realidad de alta prevalencia y graves consecuencias psicológicas y laborales en los profesionales. Este trabajo tiene como primer objetivo conocer los principales estudios realizados hasta la fecha para describir y analizar el fenómeno, así como para presentar distintas iniciativas y protocolos de actuación llevados a cabo. El segundo objetivo consiste en presentar un procedimiento de actuación tanto para prevenir agresiones como para intervenir en el caso de recibir una agresión en el desempeño laboral. Tras una búsqueda bibliográfica en las bases de datos PubMed, Scopus y SciELO, se revisan la incidencia de las agresiones sufridas por los profesionales de la salud, los contextos en los que estas son más frecuentes, sus principales repercusiones y distintas estrategias y protocolos que se han llevado a cabo en España. Dado que se echan en falta revisiones rigurosas en revistas científicas que sustenten dichos procedimientos, en este trabajo se desarrollan y proponen distintas pautas de actuación para los profesionales, tanto preventivas como de abordaje de la conducta hostil, basadas en la evidencia disponible. Por último, se propone un procedimiento sencillo de actuación dirigido a los profesionales que reciben una agresión en el desempeño de su trabajo, que permita su consulta y aplicación ante dichas situaciones.

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**Introduction**

Aggressive behaviour towards health professionals is an issue of constant concern to the scientific community and institutions. Numerous national and international studies reflect the high prevalence of this phenomenon, report its consequences and highlight the need to provide guidelines for health workers and develop action protocols. The various health care areas have had different experiences with this issue.

The objectives of this paper are first, to find the main studies completed to date to describe and analyse the phenomenon, and to present different initiatives and action protocols that have been undertaken. Secondly, to present an action procedure targeting health workers on how to prevent aggression and how they should act if subjected to aggression in the workplace.

**Violence against health workers**

Violence in the workplace, both physical and psychological, has become a problem and a primary issue for various international organisations who are concerned with human quality of life and wellbeing.<sup>1</sup> This type of violence is a major psychosocial risk factor, a human rights problem and a matter of social urgency.<sup>2</sup>

Although it affects practically all sectors and categories of work, its incidence in the area of health care is particularly high. Health workers can experience violence from colleagues, patients and their family members. Its prevalence is high in both the developing and the developed countries. In the United States, for example, the rate of violence against health care professionals is 16 times higher than that of other labour sectors.<sup>3</sup> Several studies indicate

that it is a complex phenomenon that has still not been properly defined or tackled.<sup>4-6</sup> Hostile behaviour forms part of the diverse risks faced by health personnel.<sup>7</sup>

Various different international studies show the high prevalence of attacks suffered by health professionals. Hospital records reveal that 57% of health workers have been subjected to either verbal (50%) or physical (25%)<sup>4</sup> aggression in the past year.<sup>8</sup>

In Spain, a study performed in Aragón and Castile-La Mancha<sup>9</sup> found that 11% of health professionals have suffered physical attacks and 64% psychological violence. Only 3.7% of those who suffered a physical attack reported the aggression, while none of the cases of threats or insults were reported. Eighty-five percent of cases of aggression were perpetrated by patients, in line with other studies.<sup>4,10</sup> This percentage was lower in emergency departments, where 27.3% of the attacks were carried out by people accompanying a patient.

Nurses are one of the groups that suffer the highest rates of aggression.<sup>6,11</sup> Spain's Nursing Association (*Organización Colegial de Enfermería*) carried out a study on aggression, which found that 33% of nurses in Spain have suffered some form of physical or verbal attack in the past 12 months (3.7% suffered physical aggression and 29.3% verbal).<sup>12</sup> The attacker was a patient's family member or companion in 49.8% of cases, the patient in 47.3%, and another person in 2.9%. Another study undertaken in a public hospital of the Region of Murcia shows 3% rates of physical violence suffered by nurses over the past 6 months.<sup>13</sup>

The order of hospital departments where attacks take place is as follows: emergency departments (51% of the incidents), primary care departments (33.5%) and hospital wards (15%).<sup>12</sup> The hospitals with the highest rates of violence are those with emergency departments,<sup>7</sup> and particularly those with psychiatry units.<sup>7,14,15</sup> Various stud-

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