

Efforts to curb violence staff face paying off: nursing union

ADAM BOWIE THE DAILY GLEANER



New Brunswick Nurses Union president Marilyn Quinn says a provincial effort to curb the amount of violence nurses face in the workplace in New Brunswick nursing homes is paying off. PHOTO: DAILY GLEANER ARCHIVE

A province wide effort to curb the amount of violence nurses who work in long-term care facilities must face in the line of duty is going well, according to officials from the New Brunswick Nurses Union.

Union president Marilyn Quinn said a poll of 115 nursing home nurses conducted in 2014 found 65 per cent had experienced some form of physical abuse over the past year and 78 per cent had experienced verbal abuse.

“When your numbers are that high, you can’t ignore the problem “she said.

In late 2015, members of the Nursing Home Workplace Violence Prevention Working Group - a special collaboration between the New Brunswick Association of Nursing Homes, the New Brunswick Nurses Union, WorkSafeNB and the New Brunswick Continuing Care Safety Association - announced a special campaign to tackle the volume of punches, kicks and bites that many nurses, and other front-line health professionals, must deal with while caring for their patients each day.

On Wednesday, Quinn said those efforts are paying off. The union is currently surveying its members to gather some more information about how a new tool-kit and educational awareness blitz has been working over the past nine months. In the early days, she said, there were a few

hiccups, mostly with employers and some staff members expressing hesitation to discuss these long-taboo issues.

But it seems like people are now embracing this opportunity to discuss one of the most difficult aspects of the job.

“We want to know, ‘Do they have any other suggestions in terms of what the needs are?’ We had some challenges in the workplace. I think employers, in some cases, were given the information. But not everybody wants to shine a light on this particular aspect of the workplace,” she said.

“So they didn’t, maybe, use the opportunity to talk with their staff and incorporate these ideas into the day-to-day workings of the nursing home. But we’ve been in contact and explained the goal is to reduce risk. That’s a goal that both employers and employees would want to support. I think they’re starting to be more co-operative.”

Once the feedback has been collected and analyzed, the union hopes to create an online training tool.

“We’re looking at designing a webinar,” Quinn said, explaining that the process of changing the culture in the nursing field will take time.

“It has to be a continuous effort. It’s not something that you launch once and talk about it. It needs to be incorporated into the daily aspects of health-care delivery. We always have to be vigilant, identifying the risks, and taking the appropriate preventative actions. I think that’s where the real opportunities are. We shouldn’t be waiting until the incident happens and then saying, ‘What could we have done better?’ We have to acknowledge that this is happening and do better.”

Denise Paradis, the executive director of the New Brunswick Continuing Care Safety Association, has been working with nursing homes across the province to open up new dialogues about workplace safety.

She said the process of putting these educational materials in place and opening new discussions about such a difficult subject has been tough, but necessary.

So far, she said, the feedback has been positive.

“Some of the things they found really useful was the tool for the risk assessment. It’s available online and it has everything from, ‘How dark is the front door?’ to, ‘How do you assess an individual resident’s probability of violence?’ They’ve found that very useful” she said.

Still, many nurses have trouble discussing the errant slaps, the rough pinches, the painful scratches they receive from the people they’re caring for.

“It had been such a taboo subject matter for so long. When I went to some homes to talk about it, to discuss the definition of violence in the workplace, to explain that we’re talking about staff-on-staff, outsiders-on-staff, residents-on-staff and there was a hesitation to include people who are not cognitively aware. It made people really uncomfortable to include residents in that definition. But we know we can’t sweep that conversation under the carpet,” she said.

Paradis said some homes initially didn't want to post educational posters about violence in the workplace, lest that give off the impression the facility wasn't a safe environment for families and their loved ones.

"They didn't want anyone to think any serious violence was happening in their homes. And it's not. But this is something we haven't been dealing with. It had always been considered part of the job," she said.

She said the tool-kit that's been made available to nursing home nurses also includes information and strategies for preventing violence, while still protecting the wellbeing of the aggressor.

"If I'm being bitten, how can I safely get out of that bite while protecting that person who may not know what they're doing," she said.

With more New Brunswickers living with dementia-related illnesses, the demand for specialized care has risen. In order to serve them best, she said, nurses must be able to defuse any stressful situations and protect themselves, and their colleagues, from any potential outbursts of violence through good communication and strategies.

By discussing these matters more openly now, Paradis believes the industry is better equipped to reduce violence in nursing homes.

"The important part of the whole thing is that this is allowing [staff] to start empathizing with each other. Before this, it would be like, 'Mrs. Smith pinched me. And the next person would say, 'Well, she did that to me yesterday. Suck it up. Let's keep going. On to the next thing.' Now we've brought in more awareness, we've brought back the empathy. And we can say, 'Really? I wonder why she pinched you today. What was happening so we can avoid that happening tomorrow? And, are you OK?' These kinds of conversations are happening more often now. It's not just part of the job."