Can wearables help protect healthcare staff from violence?

Compared to workers in other sectors, healthcare staff face significant risks of workplace violence. According to the U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), from 2002 to 2013, the rate of serious workplace violence incidents was more than four times greater in healthcare than in private industry.

Amidst recent cases of attacks with nurses as victims – e.g., on 5 Feb. a nurse in Pennsylvania was punched and thrown down by a man seeking care in an emergency department (ED) – many organisations have implemented security and prevention measures to safeguard employees at work.

In addition to implementing prevention strategies, many hospitals have improved their emergency communication systems to help protect patients, visitors and staff members, according to Rhonda Collins, MSN, RN, CNO of a provider of clinical communication and workflow platforms.

Collins says in one Upstate New York hospital, ED staff can use a hands-free, wearable communication badge to summon university police and public safety officers during a violent encounter or other emergency.

This method of communication is faster than making a phone call. A peer-reviewed study found that this approach reduced average security response times from 3.2 minutes in the six months before the badges were adopted to 1.02 minutes in the six months after use began.

A similar communication system is also used at a Toronto, Canada, hospital, and this has reduced the time it takes security officers to reach the scene of an incident from an average of 2 ½ minutes to 59 seconds. "That time savings can make all the difference in preventing violence," notes Collins. Besides enabling a badge user to contact security personnel quickly, the device can also alert people outside the hospital and act as a real-time locator if a staff member can't say where he or she is located.

In addition, Collins says, a mobile "panic button" can also be used to help police pinpoint the exact location in a hospital where a violent incident is occurring. For example, in 2014, an armed intruder threatened nurses at a hospital in Daytona Beach, FL. The panic feature of its clinical communication system was used to broadcast a special beep that alerted other clinicians and hospital security about the rapidly evolving incident and where in the facility it was taking place. When the police arrived, an ED security officer was able to guide them directly to the shooter on the hospital's second floor.

"By shortening response times of safety and security personnel, reliable communication technology can provide a safer work environment for hospital staff, and in some cases, save lives," says Collins.

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Image Credit: Pixabay

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