

Violence Against Doctors

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'No physician, however conscientious or careful, can tell what day or hour he may not be the object of some undeserved attack, malicious accusation, black mail or suit for damages – JAMA 1891 [1].

This statement, written 127 years ago in Journal of American Medical Association [1], has been prophetic as exemplified by increasing reports of violence against doctors not only in India [2], but across the world [3,4]. Earliest studies of violence against doctors from the USA date back to the 1980s, when 100 doctors died due to violence in a decade [5] whereas 57% of emergency care workers had been threatened with a weapon. In the UK, 52% of doctors reported some kind of violence [6]. An ongoing study by Indian Medical Association (IMA) reports that 75% of doctors in India have faced violence at some point of time [7].

Healthcare workers are four times more likely to be injured and away from work as compared to other professionals, particularly because a doctor often deals with a person when he/she is in a stressful and emotionally taxing situation [8]. Even though it is difficult to differentiate between the true rise in such incidents and increased awareness in the era of electronic mass media, the ultimate impact of such violence on the mindset of health care workers as well as public at large is a matter of deep concern. Doctors often do not report all cases of violence, especially verbal abuse, as they understand the distressed condition of patients.

Violence against doctors in India may comprise of telephonic or verbal threats, physical assaults, and vandalism. The relatives of a patient, aggressive bystanders, political party members, local goons or persons in power may attack doctors – mostly in the waiting area, consulting room/clinic, intensive care unit (ICU) or outside the operation theater (OT). They may even attack a doctor after a careful planning for taking revenge for their grievances. Doctors facing violence may suffer from depression, insomnia, stress, fear and anxiety – causing absenteeism [9]. Due to these incidents, many doctors have lost their clinics, injured themselves,

or lost lives directly due to violence or due to suicide after the loss of reputation as a professional [8]. More importantly, the medical community is in state of panic and is in regret mode of choosing a career where the society does not stand besides them. Majority of doctors are unwilling to send their children to a profession that was revered by the society, not long ago.

CAUSES OF VIOLENCE AGAINST DOCTORS

Violence against doctors is a multifactorial problem resulting from forces of economic aspirations, greed, extreme stress and frustration of modern living, competition-driven society, distorted religious, cultural, educational and social values, and increasing intolerance in the society as a whole [10]. The possible causes of worsening doctor-patient relationship in the society are outlined in **Box 1** [8,9,11,12].

WHAT ARE THE SOLUTIONS?

Role of Society

The society must understand that adverse outcomes and death in cases of diseases and accident are expected, and not always are the result of negligence.

As members of a profession that is supposed to respond to human suffering, doctors have a social responsibility. But will society reciprocate? There is an outrage when it comes to violence against women, children or the common man. But have we seen an outrage (except from health professionals), even when a doctor is grievously injured by a mindless mob? Why don't we see people on the streets holding placards and seeking action against those unleashing violence on the medical fraternity? Barring very few articles in print media and occasional support by television anchor or politicians, this burning issue has been largely ignored. Society should understand that vandalism and violence in a hospital or clinic is a criminal offense, and any civilized society should not indulge in such heinous acts.

Community fines and proscriptions should be enforced for violence against doctors. Those who assault

BOX 1 CAUSES OF WORSENING DOCTOR-PATIENT RELATIONSHIP IN THE SOCIETY

- *Misconception* in society that every death result from failure of doctors, avoiding one's duties, inordinate delay in referral, etc.
- *Sensationalizing* by media about doctors overcharging for various tests and commission business, and biased reporting by media in case of allegations of medical negligence
- *Economic shock* for the patient/relatives in absence of health insurance and rising cost of healthcare
- *Unrealistic expectation* that paying more money should always save one's life
- *Poor infrastructure*, including intensive care, crucial investigations, blood products and drugs, especially in government set-up
- *Poor communication* regarding the severity and adverse outcome possibility owing to lack of proper training of medical and paramedical personnel in communication skills
- *Increasing intolerance and restlessness*, especially in youth, and lack of civic sense in public
- *Insensitive and uncontrolled electronic and social media* leading to spread of false accusations and negative image creation of doctor
- *Lack of laws and their implementation* leading to perpetrators of violence escaping without punishment
- *Political interference* by the local politicians as a show of strength and support to the public
- *Grievance redressal system* being poor and slow
- *Low health literacy* in population perpetuated by myths and false beliefs, leading failure to understand a rational view
- *Lack of adequate security* and crowd control measures in most of the hospitals, especially in the government sector
- *Psychopathology* of transfer of one's guilt to another source – often healthcare system and doctors

doctors should be blacklisted and debarred from state subsidies and facilities, including in hospitals.

Role of Government

It is impossible to curb violence against doctors unless there is a complete overhaul of the existing economic system and healthcare system. Our country's health budget spending is meagre (approximately 2%) as compared to that of Western countries. Raising budget to address the problem of poor doctor-population ratio is the need of the hour. Assault on any doctor should be equated with assault on a government officer on duty. Existing laws should be amended to prevent future incidents of violence against doctors. Though about 19 states of India have some kind of Act for protection of medical professionals and healthcare establishments, the implementation and prosecution rate are extremely poor. Protective mechanisms should exist to prevent counter-filing of complaints by patient or the relatives in case proof of violence by them is provided by the doctor.

Role of Media

Doctors are almost always portrayed negatively by the media. There are sensational news reports of death and sting operations against doctors. Such sensationalism not only is detrimental to doctors, but also to the society as a whole as healthcare professionals become reluctant to handle serious cases and challenging procedures and

surgeries [8]. Media needs to understand that the practice of medicine is not a black-and-white subject. Rather than intimidating the doctors and nurses by barging into wards and shelling them with a barrage of questions even as they grapple with the high patient inflow in available infrastructure, it is important for the media to play a responsible role in bringing out the best of the doctors and project them as role models so that the others are inspired to be ethical.

Responsibilities of the Institutions

Improvement of services in a global fashion; employment of adequate number of doctors and other steps to ease the rush of patients and long waiting hours; use of technology to prevent long queues in the hospital; ensuring regular communication with the patients; transparent billing systems; and installation of CCTV and a zero tolerance policy towards workplace violence are the essential steps to prevent violence against healthcare professionals. Hospital security should be strengthened and it needs to be properly interlocked with nearby police station. Also, there should be a proper complaint redressal system in the hospital.

If violence occurs despite taking all precautions, it is important for the institution to protect the doctors involved, but at the same time not meet anger with anger. A standard operating procedure (SOP), such as Code Purple [8] used worldwide to alert medical staff to

potential violence, should be developed. It includes the following measures to be taken in case of violence:

1. An announcement on the hospital's public address system indicating location of violence, at the start and also after it is over
2. Security staff to respond immediately
3. All the staff (except that of ICU and OT) to come to aid, and form a human chain using restraint
4. A senior member of staff not involved in treatment may try to communicate with the patient's relatives and try de-escalating the situation
5. The practice of this drill should be done monthly in every medical establishment

Role of Doctors

Doctors should play a proactive role and ensure ethical medical practice. Rightly, there has been a proposal of including soft-skills and communication skills in the medical curriculum that will help medicos to empathize, remain calm, and be patient irrespective of repeated prodding by the anxious patients. The training should help in assertiveness, refusal skills, anger management, and stress management [8]. The doctors should avoid overreach – treating beyond the scope of one's training and facilities – to prevent both violence and litigations against them. False and unrealistic assurances to the relatives should be avoided.

All doctors should ensure that a valid and informed consent is obtained properly, and not just considered a formality. Extra efforts should be taken to explain the condition to the relatives because healthcare literacy is low in the country. Proper communication, and documentation of treatment and communication should be a part of routine practice. Indemnity insurance is a must for every doctor and hospital. Apart from all these steps, it is important to be vigilant and look for early warning signs of violence such as staring, mumbling and pacing [13]. In case the violence is imminent, the doctors should deal with the situation calmly and intelligently. Evidence of violence in form of photography, video recording or statements by witnesses should be collected by a person deputed for the purpose [14]. The security or police should be informed immediately, and personal protective measures should be immediately enabled. Doctors should avoid 'settling' the issue by waving off the bills or paying hush money [14].

To ensure that doctors work with devotion and dedication, there is an urgent need to rekindle the trust between doctors and patients, and ensuring a safe workplace environment.

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