

I have been a nurse for 45 years and have spent most of my career working in behavioral health. I have been punched, kicked, spit on and cursed at. For patients who are truly psychotic and responding to voices that they hear in their heads, I have understanding and compassion. But in dealing with patients who are substance abusers, sociopaths and violent individuals, I fear the results of an attack on my co-workers and myself.

A few years ago an incident happened that made me realize just how vulnerable we are as health care workers. A female patient came to our psychiatric emergency room seeking detox/rehab for her IV drug dependency. She was HIV positive with a history of hepatitis C and syphilis; all blood-borne diseases that are transmitted through contact with the infected person's blood.

As the patient was waiting to be evaluated, she took out a concealed knife and started to cut herself. Staff members intervened immediately. A crisis response tech and a mental health worker were cut and I was bitten as we attempted to disarm the patient. The knife wounds were quickly treated, but both techs were required to take HIV meds three months. The months following the attack were difficult for those men as they waited for follow up test results, hoping they would not be diagnosed with a serious disease. I was bitten through my clothing and was not required to take HIV prophylaxis, but the potential for a much worse outcome left me shaken for months.

We need whatever help we can get to stop the violence in healthcare. Not only are healthcare workers at risk, but every patient and visitor to our facility.

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