Nurse-to-Nurse Bullying: A Fact Sheet

Key Facts:
- 70% of nurses report working with nurses or other staff who are insulting, disrespectful, or rude.¹
- 60% of recently graduated nurses leave their first position within six months partly as a result of lateral violence and bullying.²
- Work environments where bullying exists have significantly increased rates of medical errors and adverse patient outcomes.³, ⁴

Scope of the Problem:
Bullying – also known as horizontal or lateral violence – among nurses and other members of the health care team is a major threat to the nursing workforce. Nurses are the largest component of the health care workforce, and severe nursing workforce shortages are expected due to an aging nursing population and an accelerated rate of nurse retirements. Workforce shortages would be made even more severe if, as has been estimated, one out of five recently graduated nurses are leaving the profession permanently within five years due to bullying in the work place.², ³

The Joint Commission (TJC) has identified disruptive behaviors as a major threat to patient safety and a contributing factor to increased rates of medical errors and adverse patient outcomes.⁵ As of January 2009, TJC is requiring policies and procedures for identifying and managing disruptive behaviors. Health care organizations are required to have oversight systems in place which reduce and/or eliminate disruptive (including bullying) behaviors.⁵

Describe the Problem:
In the stressful environment of caring for patients, nurses who often feel overworked, not respected or appreciated are likely to take out their frustrations on each other. Bartholomew divides nurse bullying behaviors into verbal behaviors which include name calling, sarcasm, criticism, and intimidation and nonverbal behaviors which include unfair assignments, ignoring, refusal to help when asked, refusal to work with someone and exclusion, to name a few.², ³

Cost and Consequences of the Problem:
- Significant increase in the costs of delivering patient care;⁵
- Increased rates of nursing staff turnover resulting in increased hospital expenditures for recruitment and training costs;⁴, ⁵
- Long-lasting psychological, physical, emotional, and social impacts on bullied Nurses;¹, ⁴, ⁵ and
- Costly medical errors and deleterious patient outcomes.⁵, ⁶

Strategies and Solutions:
- Education of all staff members on appropriate professional behavior.⁶
- Specify unacceptable behaviors including bullying. Adopt a zero tolerance policy.⁴, ⁶
- Confront the aggressor. Do not be a “silent witness” to bullying and abuse.⁷
- Provide staff training in conflict management and confrontation skills.¹, ⁶, ⁷
- Ensure that preceptors of nursing students and recently graduated nurses are provided incentives, training, and support to prevent bullying of students in the clinical setting.¹, ³
References: