# Violence against health workers in Northern Ireland rises alarmingly



A concerning report from The Irish News highlights the ongoing issue of violence against health and social care workers in Northern Ireland, revealing that currently, a total of 22 staff members are on sick leave due to assaults encountered while on duty. This incident follows questions raised by East Derry MLA Claire Sugden to the Health Minister regarding the safety and welfare of workers in the health sector.

The figures disclosed indicate that of those 22 staff members, 10 were employed in social care or social work support roles, while the remaining 12 came from various backgrounds including nursing, midwifery, and allied health professions. The South Eastern Trust has seen the highest impact, with nine staff members absent due to assaults, followed by the Northern Trust with five and the Belfast Trust with four. Four additional staff are off work from the Southern and Western trusts as well as the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS).

Rita Devlin, Executive Director of the Royal College of Nursing (RCN), expressed serious concern about the levels of physical and verbal assaults against health workers. Speaking to The Irish News, she described these incidents as posing “a huge risk” for employees spanning emergency care to community services. Devlin noted a growing anxiety among newly registered nurses, many of whom are reportedly fearful of entering their workplace due to the rising tide of aggression.

Devlin characterised the reported figure of 22 as merely “the tip of the iceberg,” indicating that the actual number of health staff affected by workplace violence is considerably higher. Citing the RCN’s Employment Survey from 2023, she stated that approximately 30.9% of nursing personnel had faced physical abuse from patients and their families in the preceding year, with a striking 66.7% experiencing verbal abuse. Notably, more than 60% of those reporting physical abuse associated these incidents with the health or personal issues of the aggressor, and 40% mentioned that aggression stemmed from patients or relatives who were intoxicated or had a known history of violence.

This ongoing crisis in workplace safety has prompted Devlin to call for urgent intervention from employers, stating that it is their responsibility to provide a secure working environment. She emphasised the necessity for “clear and decisive action” to ensure that all incidents are addressed swiftly and that there are repercussions for those who perpetrate violence against healthcare workers.

Brian Crawford, the deputy regional trade union coordinator for health trade unions in Northern Ireland, echoed these sentiments by expressing that the statistical data on assaults does not fully depict the reality. He highlighted that many instances of aggression occur outside of formal settings, such as patients' relatives confronting workers in public areas. Crawford mentioned an example of a nurse in Belfast who experienced harassment from an individual following her, which illustrates the broader sense of vulnerability frontline workers often endure.

Crawford further stated, “That figure of 22, you could easily multiply it by five as it’s become so normalised that people think this is part of their job when it absolutely shouldn’t be.” He also underscored dissatisfaction with the 2023 policy aimed at mitigating violence against health staff, asserting that it has not been effectively executed and that there is a pressing need for enhanced training for managers on its implementation.

The situation presents a complex challenge for Northern Ireland's health and social care system as it grapples with the significant health impacts on its workforce as well as the implications for patient care.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## References

* <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/news/over-50000-attacks-healthcare-staff-last-five-years> - This article supports the claim of widespread violence against healthcare staff in Northern Ireland, highlighting over 50,000 attacks in the last five years and the efforts to address this issue through a new framework.
* <https://www.who.int/activities/preventing-violence-against-health-workers> - This WHO page corroborates the global issue of violence against health workers, noting that it affects their well-being and job motivation, and emphasizes the need for interventions to prevent such violence.
* <https://www.qub.ac.uk/News/Allnews/2024/projectinhospitalsreducesviolence.html> - This report highlights the success of the 'Connect' project in reducing violence among young people in Northern Ireland, which indirectly supports the broader context of addressing violence in healthcare settings.
* <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2024/04/22/2024-07496/guidance-for-federal-financial-assistance> - Although not directly related to healthcare violence, this document provides general guidance on federal assistance, which could be relevant in funding initiatives to address workplace violence.
* <https://www.vacourts.gov/courts/scv/rulesofcourt.pdf> - This document outlines legal procedures in Virginia, which, while not directly addressing healthcare violence, provides a framework for legal actions that could be applied to cases involving violence against healthcare workers.