Healthcare Workers Suffer from Psychological Abuse and Physical Violence – Survey Results - Working Conditions of Healthcare Workers

Healthcare workers serve patients’ health and lives, yet such workers, ironically, suffer verbal abuse, physical violence and sexual harassment. They experience tremendous stress because of psychological abuse, and disruptions in biorhythms caused by shift work that prevents them from sleeping deeply. Such conditions distract them from focusing at work, increasing the risk of medical accidents, not to mention seriously damaging workers’ health conditions. The Korea Health and Medical Workers Union (KHMU, President Yoo Ji Hyun) conducted a survey for two months from March through April. The 2016 Fact-Finding Survey collected responses from 20,950 healthcare workers at 110 hospitals nationwide.

Around half of respondents (47.6%) said they had unpleasant verbal and physical experiences (verbal abuse: 41.0%, physical violence: 5.5%, sexual violence: 1.1%). Patients represented the absolute majority of assailants (verbal abuse: 70.1%, physical violence: 83.7%, sexual violence: 70.0%), followed by the patients’ family and caregivers (verbal abuse: 65.6%, physical violence: 21.6%, sexual violence: 12.9%).

In cases of verbal abuse, however, physicians (36.5%) and supervisors (29.1%) also ranked in the category of attackers. (Note that respondents could mark all that apply in the question about attacks of verbal abuse, physical violence, and sexual violence.)

According to the latest survey, victims exposed to emotional abuse mostly endure unpleasant experiences (verbal abuse: 89.7%, physical violence: 58.6%, sexual violence: 60.5%). Although some said they responded to the negative experiences (verbal abuse: 22.4%, physical violence: 37.6%, sexual violence: 25.3%), only a few took legal or institutional action.

The answers on the rate of psychological abuse and forced emotional responses reveal that approximately 86.2% of respondents feel obliged to smile or grin, regardless of their feelings, and 90.5% responded that they had to hide their authentic emotions at work, showing the depth of emotional disruption.

The time needed to go to sleep averages 53.2 minutes for healthcare workers, while healthy people in other sectors report 5 to 20 minutes. Therefore, healthcare workers take two to three times longer to fall asleep than non-healthcare workers because of extreme stress and sleep disruptions. Among healthcare workers, nurses take longest time (60.4 minutes) to get to sleep. Meanwhile, those in non-nursing sectors fall asleep in 39.8 minutes. According to anecdotal evidence, the irregular sleep cycle resulting from the three shifts system lengthens nurses’ sleep onset time.

Regarding deep sleep, 62.1% of the respondents said they awoke 1 to 2 times in a night over the past week, while 22.5% said 3 to 4 times. For getting back to sleep after waking over the past week, the highest, or 32.5% reported difficulty 1 to 2 times a week, while 24.8% said 3 to 4 times, and 12.3% noted 5 times or more.

Among nurses, 25.2% said they awoke 3 to 4 times in the middle of the night, which is higher than the 17.6% shown in non-nursing job employees among healthcare workers. In addition, 14% of nurses said they couldn’t get back to sleep 5 times or more over the past week. In contrast, among non-nursing job employees, only 9.2% experienced trouble getting back to sleep 5 or more times a week.

As for the self-evaluation about sleep health, KHMU members scored 38.8 out of 100 points on average. Also, far more workers responded that their quality of sleep was poor rather than good. Today, night shift work is categorized on the list of grade 2 carcinogenic substances.
(reasons), and night shift workers are included on the list of those who need special medical check-ups.

- Among occupational diseases or reasons for accidents on duty, sleep disorders rank first (27.8%, 5,831 respondents), followed by muscular skeletal disease (25.1%, 5,248), bruises and fractures (9.6%, 2,025) and tuberculosis and infection (2.3%, 484). Work contributes to the diseases of depression (1.5%, 317), cardiovascular disease (1.2%, 260) and cancer (0.4%, 84). However, only a small number of respondents (33.1%) know what and how the hospitals should compensate them, nor how to apply for compensation.

- Extreme emotional and psychological abuse (verbal abuse, physical violence, and sexual harassment) often cause stress and a lower quality of sleep. Consequently, workers could suffer chronic fatigue, which distracts workers' focus and may lead to accidents. In this situation, patients' safety could also be threatened. Therefore, proper measures should be implemented soon.

- On June 19, a nurse who worked at the Chonnam National University Hospital for 25 years committed suicide. Although she once suffered depression due to job stress from the Korean Healthcare Accreditation System, she had recovered. Afterwards, she was assigned to the operating room. But, due to a heavy emotional burden, she relapsed, which ended with her tragic suicide. This situation is not confined to her and her hospital alone. Extreme shortages in personnel, poor working conditions, emotionally taxing jobs, and rigid, top-down management cultures are found everywhere in Korea's hospitals. Considering these factors, another similar tragedy can happen in any hospital, at any time.

- A hospital's mission is to cure the ill. Ironically, however, today's hospitals seem to be causing illness. Healthcare workers taking care of patients’ health should be able to keep themselves healthy. But, they suffer extreme job stress, accidents, and diseases in the hospital environment. This problem should be promptly addressed.

- With the slogan, "For Hospitals where Patients and Employees Are all Safe," KHMU plans to do as follows: drive campaigns against verbal abuse, physical violence and sexual harassment; create guidelines for eradication of verbal abuse, physical violence and sexual harassment; post a warning post jointly produced by employers and employees to root out violence in hospitals; urge actions to protect shift workers and night shift work; and actively participate in the Workplace Safety and Health Council meetings.