



A Position Statement on Psychological Violence in the Workplace (also known as “Bullying”)

Preamble

Psychological Violence, or bullying, in the workplace is on the rise in Canada. In 2000 a survey of Canadian Unions documented that more than 75% of those surveyed reported incidents of harassment and bullying at work.

This includes:

“Any vexatious behaviour in the form of hostile, inappropriate and unwanted conduct, verbal comments, actions or gestures that affects an employee’s dignity or psychological or physical integrity and that results in a harmful workplace for the employee.”¹

“Psychological violence is hostile and repetitive behaviour which most often takes the form of harassment. Psychological harassment may occur between colleagues or in the context of a hierarchical relationship. It can also be exercised collectively: in this case, the environment becomes hostile. Through injurious attitudes or comments, they marginalize and exclude the victim by discrediting her.

Psychological violence most often is manifested subtly, which makes it difficult to identify. Its effects reveal its severity. It is difficult to obtain recognition for this form of violence from employers, who tend to downplay it and gloss over abuse of power by reducing it to a personality conflict.”²

A number of jurisdictions have taken steps to address this problem, most notably the Province of Quebec which enacted legislation that explicitly recognizes “Psychological Harassment” in its *Labour Standards Act*. Additionally, in 2003 a Private Members Bill came before the Canadian Federal Government entitled Bill C-451 “An Act to prevent psychological harassment in the

¹ Government of Canada, [DRAFT] Bill C-451, First Reading

² FIIQ, A Policy to Counter Violence at Work. 2001

workplace and to amend the Canada Labour Code.” Sadly, this Act died on the order paper. Most other jurisdictions leave this matter to be addressed by broad and inadequate provisions found in Provincial Workers’ Compensation Legislation or in various forms in Collective Agreements.

In healthcare for nurses, as in other workforces, bullying takes on at least two different forms: lateral psychological violence or bullying (also known as “horizontal hostility”) within the nursing profession; and, psychological violence of nurses by others. Several recent studies have indicated that up to 70% of nurses who are the targets of bullying behaviour leave the profession. Of particular alarm is the high numbers of new practitioners who leave the workforce within 6 months due to psychological violence. Research has indicated a link between nurses’ rise in workload with increased instances of bullying in the workplace. All forms of bullying are unacceptable.³

Position

The Canadian Federation of Nurses Unions believes that:

- All forms of bullying or psychological violence are unacceptable.
- All people are entitled dignity, respect and to work and/or receive health care services in an environment free of harassment and discrimination, which includes acts of psychological violence or bullying.
- Bullying or psychological violence must be addressed by immediate measures and is a particular risk for nurses as a category of workers. Such harassment is a *significant* concern for the retention of nurses in all jurisdictions in Canada.
- “Violence in the health workplace threatens the delivery of effective patient services. If quality care is to be provided, nursing personnel must be ensured a safe work environment and respectful treatment. Excessive workload, unsafe working conditions, and inadequate support can be considered forms of violence and incompatible with good practice.”⁴
- Each Province, Territory and the Federal Government must follow the lead of the Province of Quebec and enact decisive legislation which explicitly prohibits psychological violence in all of its forms in the workplace.

³ Namie (2003); Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (2003); Randle (2003); Gross (2005).

⁴ ICN Position Statement, 2001

- Health Employers, including Governments, must also adopt explicit policies in the workplace to promote a “zero tolerance” to psychological harassment which includes: educational programs for all staff; specialized training for all managers, clinical educators or those in positions of power over others; immediate and effective interventions for those claiming to be victims of bullying; effective resolves for victims of bullying and severe consequences for the bullies themselves.
- Nursing Educational Curricula must proactively address issues of psychological violence or bullying.

References

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