

*Originally Published in the Telegraph Journal on March 16, 2017 at*  
<https://www.telegraphjournal.com/times-transcript/story/100122467/>

## **Will it take a death for NB to pass nurse protection law?**

**By Paula Doucet**

The New Brunswick Nurses Union recently shared, with media, the results of two surveys, regarding registered nurses and their experiences of workplace violence. The numbers were startling.

On our first survey of 400 randomly selected members, 54% had experienced some form of abuse in the past year. When we polled our entire membership, garnering 779 responses, 66% reported physical or verbal abuse or both during the preceding 12 months.

It's now been just over 10 years since Statistics Canada conducted a National Survey on the Work and Health of Nurses.

What was most discouraging about the results of NBNU's recent surveys is that they showed how little progress has been made in the past decade. Rather than showing a decline in the rate of violent incidents over that time, our members reported more incidents of violence than did the New Brunswick nurses surveyed by Stats Can in 2005.

The largest jump was in verbal abuse/harassment, which accounted for 73% of violent incidents. This trend is alarming.

Cause for further concern is that according to NBNU's surveys, only about a quarter of the violent incidents are being reported to the employer. Registered nurses have been reluctant to report for various reasons.

There has been a longstanding culture of accepting violence as "just part of the job."

For example, registered nurses are sensitive to a patient, client or resident, who becomes violent, but does not have the capacity to appreciate their actions; or have been sympathetic to the verbal frustrations of the family member who waited an inordinate amount of time for their loved one to be seen in the emergency department.

Those who experience violence on the job may also fear retaliation or be worried they will be blamed for the abuse if they speak up.

Another reason often given for not reporting a violent incident is that it is pointless, as nothing will change. Without robust prevention, response and follow-measures in place, reporting abuse to their employer has no positive outcomes and several potential risks.

This is one important reason for having violence clearly defined as a workplace hazard in occupational health and safety legislation. Not only would amending the legislation help ensure the violence prevention work in healthcare workplaces continues, it would place a legal onus on all employers to act when employees report violence incidents to them.

But it doesn't stop with a legislative change. Awareness and education need to take place to reinforce the fact that workplace abuse and harassment will not be tolerated and it is not accepted in any workplace in NB.

NBNU and health-care employers have recently been working together to mitigate workplace violence. As a result of these valued and collaborative partnerships, to develop and implement violence prevention measures, both NBNU and employers have been stressing the importance of reporting all incidents of abuse.

As a result, and despite the recent survey results regarding unreported incidents, our members are starting to speak up. I recently heard from one of our local presidents that more violent incidents have been reported in their hospital in the first two months of 2017 than in all of 2016.

NBNU and employers have rolled up their sleeves and started the work of improving violence prevention efforts on the front lines of healthcare, but government is long overdue to do their part on a legislative level.

The best politics and best practices cannot replace the law. All New Brunswick workers need the law to guarantee that risk assessments will be done in their workplaces and that the required prevention measures will be put into place.

Even with the prevention measures in place, violence and abuse may still occur, and New Brunswick workers deserve to be protected by a law, like other workers across Canada.

New Brunswick remains the lone province where workplace violence is not recognized as a workplace hazard under occupation health and safety type legislation.

This is despite the advocacy work done by NBNU and other labour organizations over the past decade. Our hospitals are overcrowded and understaffed, leading to increased risk for frustration and violent episode.

In Ontario it took the death of Lori Dupont, RN, for that government to amend their legislation. In October 2016, a weapons related incident at Soldiers Memorial Hospital in Middleton, Nova Scotia spurred Premier McNeil to collaborate with the Nova Scotia Nurses' Union, and others, to begin working to make their health-care facilities safer.

Nova Scotia has existing Violence in the Workplace Regulations, and following this incident, there was a commitment to make hospital ERs safer. Preventing workplace violence takes both a law that acknowledges the risk, mandates action, and a commitment from employers, government and employees to work collaboratively to ensure workplaces are safe, no matter where that workplace might be.

The government of New Brunswick prides itself as a leader on many levels, yet we are the last province to make safety for all workers a priority. Will it take a fatality for this government to do the right thing to protect all workers in New Brunswick?

*Paula Doucet is the president of the New Brunswick Nurses Union which represents over 6900 registered nurses and nurse practitioners working in the province.*