

Assaults on Nurses in the Workplace

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Nurses see some terrible things in health care facilities, and this is especially true where patients are in such fragile condition.

My career in healthcare began as an Institutional Attendant (IA) at Trenton Psychiatric Hospital (TPH) in 1973. IAs assisted with the direct care of patients. We were also called on when a patient needed to be restrained. Restraint involved physically holding the patient down, while the nurse gave an injection. The patient was then placed in an isolation room. Not infrequently, patients would assault staff, or other patients, before sufficient help could arrive, resulting in injuries.

I had some judo training before I started working at TPH, and I quickly realized that judo principles were the best way to restrain a patient. Judo uses the strength and power of the assault against the assaulter, while hurting him the least.

While working at TPH, I completed the nursing program at Mercer County Community College. I then worked as an RN at Carrier Clinic, a highly rated private psychiatric facility. Assaults on staff continued at Carrier, but the improved staffing levels ensured fewer injuries.

Later, I spent eight years working in Intensive Care Units and Coronary Care Units (ICU/CCUs). I never witnessed any assaults on nurses in the ICU/CCUs. We nurses see some terrible things in health care facilities, and this is especially true where patients are in such fragile condition. Sometimes we nurses blame ourselves when a patient's condition de-

teriorates, and we suffer post-traumatic stress.

I also worked for about a year as a Public Health Nurse for the City of Trenton. I took part in various clinics in the inner city. I also went into private residences, to give education and supplies to pregnant teenagers, and to perform Well-Baby checks on newborns. Everyone I met was glad to see me and, despite the inner-city circumstances, I never once experienced any assaults.

I began working at the New Jersey Department of Corrections (DOC) in 1984 and I retired in 2006. In my 22 years at the DOC, I never once got assaulted in any of the maximum-security prisons. Though once, when I worked in a minimum-security juvenile facility, a teenage girl threw liquid Thorazine in my face, rather than drink it. I was wearing glasses and avoided injury.

In my DOC orientation, I was told that assaults on staff usually happened for a reason. The most likely reason is that the staff has formed an inappropriate relationship with an inmate. But also, about 10% of New Jersey inmates suffered from mental illness, and a psychiatric patient may lash out for no discernible reason.

The staffing in the DOC was excellent. There were always Correction Officers nearby, who were trained to deal with assaults.

My older sister, Nancy, was a nurse who was trained at the Helene Fuld Hospital School of Nursing in the 1960's. During her nurse's training, she took a judo class there. I practiced it with her, before my more formal judo training as a teenage Explorer Scout.

Judo training was not a part of my nursing education. But it is a very good thing for a nurse to know. It is something we nurses can do for ourselves, while we wait for federal and state legislation to aid us. Congress must pass the [Workplace Violence Prevention for Health Care and Social Service Workers Act \(H.R. 2531 / S.1232\)*](#) and the [New Jersey legislature must mandate improved healthcare staffing**](#).

In addition, we need more study on this to determine what else we can do to reduce these workplace injuries. ■

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* <https://www.congress.gov/bill/119th-congress/house-bill/2531/text> and <https://www.congress.gov/bill/119th-congress/house-bill/929>

** https://www.njleg.state.nj.us/bill-search/2024/A3683/bill-text?f=A4000&n=3683_11