

# Throwing punches

Do you work at night, with an unpredictable public, or in a highly stressed environment? Then violence is an ever-present threat.

The nurse in the hospital emergency department on a Saturday night, the bus driver working the New Year's Eve shift, or the security guard delivering cash – all are faced with the risk of physical violence during their regular duties.

Workplace violence tends to be under-reported, with overseas research suggesting at least eight per cent of employees experience a physical attack during their working lives.

Occupational violence is any incident where a worker is physically attacked or threatened, either in the workplace or during workplace activities. This includes words or behaviour that make you think you're in danger of being assaulted, as well as a physical attack. Striking, kicking, throwing objects, pushing, and tripping – all come under the umbrella of physical violence and are unacceptable in the workplace.

## Danger Zones

**Face-to-face interaction with the general public** always carries a risk of violence, particularly when people are unpredictable.

Federal Secretary of the Australian Nursing Federation, Ged Kearney, recently called on the government to help ensure the safety and protection of nurses against drunken and drug-affected patients. She said nurses were being scratched, hit, kicked, bitten, verbally abused, and even spat at during work.

"Nurses just want to care for their patients, and don't want to come under physical or verbal attack while trying to do their job," she explained. "Changes that make workplaces safer could include a panic button, safer car parking areas, alternative exits, and a safe in which to keep drugs and weapons found on patients."

If your clients are distressed, intoxicated, or disturbed, violence can soon follow. Likewise, if your job involves investigating and enforcing specific legal requirements, or if you have to deny someone a service, emotions can run high, sometimes ending in violent actions.

**Working with objects of value** – whether it's cash, jewellery, or drugs – brings with it the risk of a violent robbery.

**Working at night**, particularly if you work alone, also has security risks. Many businesses, such as call centres, operate outside normal, daylight hours. Employees then need to walk to cars or public transport at night, with an ever-present threat of assault.

While some occupations carry a permanent risk of violence from outside, violence within the workplace is also a growing trend. Rapid changes at work can lead to fear, frustration, and stress, which can be taken out not only on co-workers, but also on customers and patients.

The risk of violence at work can be lowered with a number of steps, including:

- **Changing the workplace or equipment**, such as widening service desks, installing barriers, and securing worker areas.
- **Changing the system of work**, such as increasing the efficiency of services at peak times to reduce client frustration; limiting valuables stored at work; and training workers in aggression management.

And as individuals, we can start by being less 'individual', and learning how to better handle conflict, respect others, and be effective communicators.

**Note:** If you are subjected to unacceptable violent behaviour, you have the right to withdraw to safety. Unless you are defending yourself using reasonable force, you don't have the right to retaliate physically or verbally.



## Ask The Expert

**My father has macular degeneration and needs to see an orthoptist. What is an orthoptist, and how can one help him?**

President of the Orthoptic Association of Australia, Associate Professor Zoran Georgievski replies:

"An orthoptist is an eye care professional who specialises in the detection, diagnosis, and treatment of vision and eye disorders.

"You won't see an orthoptist's clinic on the high street, as you will an optometrist's.

"Orthoptists mostly work in specialist eye clinics and public hospitals, where they work alongside ophthalmic surgeons to monitor eye disease and provide treatment. This includes treating children and adults who have strabismus (or 'lazy eye') and other eye movement abnormalities.

"A major part of an orthoptist's work is to assess, monitor, and assist in treating patients who have cataract, glaucoma, diabetic retinopathy, and age-related macular degeneration – the 'big four' major causes of vision impairment in Australia.

"Orthoptists provide the preoperative measurements to enable appropriate selection of an intraocular lens for successful cataract surgery.

"Orthoptists also try to relieve symptoms and enhance vision performance. By providing rehabilitation programs for people with vision impairment, orthoptists can help them to make the best use of the remaining vision they have, in order to maintain independence."

Orthoptic Awareness Week runs from 8th to 12th March 2010. More information can be found at [orthoptics.org.au](http://orthoptics.org.au).

👉 I object to violence because when it appears to do good, the good is only temporary; the evil it does is permanent. 👉

Mahatma Gandhi.