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Riney: Protect against violence in health care

Bob Riney

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I wish we didn't have to do this all over again — to feel the range of emotions and have the painful conversation after yet another rash of deadly mass shootings in our country, including at a busy medical center in Atlanta earlier this month. As a lifelong healthcare employee, this tragedy left me uniquely heartbroken.

Yet again, this is a sobering reminder of a painful and evident truth: we're living in increasingly troubled times. Civility is fragile. Emotions are boiling over. And violence, in all its forms, is ubiquitous. To use a healthcare metaphor, the fever is rising, and it's going to take all of us to bring the temperature down.

Here's the harsh reality, in the past few years violence in healthcare settings nationwide has spiked — from rural to suburban to urban settings alike — with assaults on healthcare workers making up most of the cases.

According to 2022 data from industry-leading healthcare experience company Press Ganey, 57 nurses are attacked every day in the U.S. That's two nurses *every hour*. Not to mention the other frontline workers who face these same risks every day. At Henry Ford Health we're not immune. We've also seen a year-over-year increase in reported violent behavior by patients and visitors.

At Henry Ford, we're charting a new course called "The Future of Health," focused on reimagining the care we provide across our communities and building deeper partnerships with those we serve. But we can't get there until everyone who walks through our doors — patients, visitors and team members alike — feels safe, secure, valued, respected and cared for.

With urgency, we must summon the courage to acknowledge what's happening — and we must do something about it.

Earlier this year, we formed an organization-wide task force to assess the security of our facilities and take important steps toward building the safest environment we can for everyone. Since then, we've begun installing weapons detection systems at our major emergency departments, increased de-escalation training and education, rolled out a 24/7 support hotline for team members. This month, we're debuting a multi-channel campaign designed to spark honest dialogue, provide resources and validate the stress and anxiety that our patients, families and team members often face.

While we do our part, I call on others to do theirs. Despite a well-documented increase in violence across the healthcare industry, there's still currently no federal law protecting healthcare employees from workplace assault or intimidation. Well-intentioned bills have been developed, modeled after federal laws with elevated penalties and protections for airline employees and first responders, but they've stalled.

What are we waiting for? While passing federal law isn't the only thing that can be done, it's certainly a great step forward.

Violence isn't unique to healthcare settings, but we do bear its unique burden. We see the impacts of violence every day, whether it happens inside or outside our facilities. We must build an environment where hope and healing, along with peace, compassion and empathy prevail.

Every time I get discouraged; I think about our team — the best team in healthcare. I think about our patients and members — the center of our sacred mission. And I'm instantly reminded that our safety is worth the fight.

My career in healthcare began nearly 45 years ago as a 19-year-old college student working front desk security on the campus of Henry Ford Hospital in Detroit. I know what a unique responsibility it was to ensure the safety and security of my fellow team members, our patients and visitors. It's a responsibility I still feel and carry with me to this day. There's a lot more to do and we all have unique roles to play.

Let's take those first steps — to acknowledge what's happening and face this sobering truth head on. Because, in the end, the truth heals.

Bob Riney is the CEO of Henry Ford Health.

