

Health-care workers under attack

More than 50 percent of providers assaulted on job; problem global

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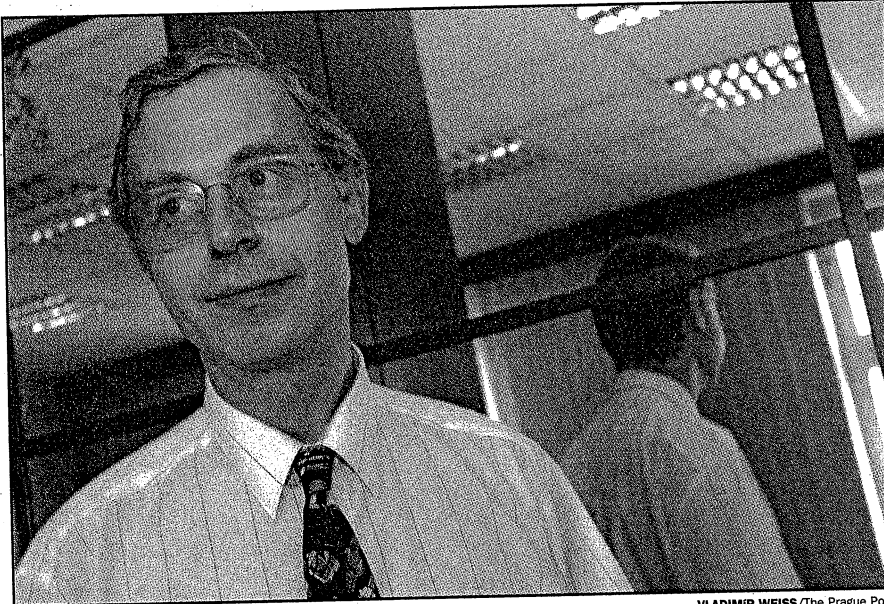
When Dr. Zdeněk Šefna stopped to provide medical assistance at the scene of an automobile accident, he never dreamed he would end up as a patient in the hospital as well.

But that's exactly what happened, and according to Czech labor advocates, he's not in a minority.

Šefna arrived at the scene of a drunken-driving accident involving three people April 28. He began administering aid to the driver, who had been badly injured. While Šefna was attending to him, the two other men involved in the accident attacked the driver, kicking him in the stomach. Šefna reflexively tried to protect the injured man, and then the two intoxicated passengers turned on him. By the time the fire brigade arrived and stopped the assault, Šefna had suffered a head injury and a broken nose.

The problem of assaults against health-care workers is global, it seems. The mounting incidences of violence against health-care workers worldwide led to the 2002 release of "Framework guidelines for addressing workplace violence in the health sector," compiled by a joint task force of the International Labor Office (ILO), the World Health Organization, Public Services International and the International Council of Nurses.

In both developed and developing countries around the world, nearly 25 percent of all violent incidents in the workplace occur in the health-care sector and more than 50 percent of health-care workers have experienced such incidents, according to the ILO. The European Commission defines



VLADIMIR WEISS/The Prague Post

Jiří Schlanger, chairman of the health- and social-care trade unions group, has lobbied for worker safety.

workplace violence as "incidents where staff are abused, threatened or assaulted in circumstances related to their work." Incidences of violence range from humiliation to verbal or physical assault and even homicide.

A 2003 British National Health Service survey of more than 3,000 doctors cites the patient's health or personal problems as the top reason for assault, followed by dissatisfaction with service, a history of violence, and intoxication. In a country such as the Czech Republic, with one of the lowest rates of violent crime in Europe and the highest per-capita beer consumption, one might wonder how often intoxication plays into assaults.

"There is always a possibility of assault associated with those conditions," said Monika Rojčková, a radi-

ologist who is often in the emergency room when drunken people are brought in for treatment. She works in northern Moravia and is a member of one of the unions represented by the Czech Health and Social Care Trade Unions Organization.

And clearly, the assault on Šefna can be directly linked to alcohol.

Only about 2 percent of attacks at Faculty Hospital Motol in Prague 6 are alcohol- or drug-related, said Jaromír Morávek, hospital spokesperson. Still, he recognizes a more widespread problem. Morávek said that workers are aware of the danger to staff presented by visitors and patients and have installed cameras and a 24-hour security service to increase safety. Although Morávek doesn't have statistics about attacks in his hospital, he said he believes it is

significantly lower than 50 percent. But he also states, "It has to be said that the hospital is usually not the place of first contact between the medical staff and the patient."

Safety awareness for frontline medical-care workers is critical, said Jiří Schlanger, chairman of the Czech Health and Social Care Trade Unions Organization, which represents more than 50,000 workers in a variety of professions in the social and health-care fields. Schlanger's concern is so acute that he took it upon himself to have the ILO's guidelines translated into Czech and distributed 3,000 copies to local union representatives and major employers. He also presented the publication in a session of Parliament in April, to raise the deputies' awareness of the issue.

So far, policymakers' reactions to

UNSAFE CONDITIONS

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- ▶ More than 50 percent of health-care workers have experienced such incidents

Source: International Labor Office

Schlanger's presentations have been lukewarm. Schlanger applied to the Health Ministry for 1 million Kč (\$37,000) in grant money to do a thorough survey of conditions for front-line health-care workers and to get statistics that back up his assertions. His request for grant money was denied. Ministry officials told him that they had no money for such things, according to Schlanger.

Some in the field think preventive measures may be futile and are calling for punishment to be levied against the attackers.

"I do not think it is right that these attacks usually go unpunished," Rojčková said. "It is absolutely useless to make medical staff go to self-defense courses because they can't beat a man with a gun, anyway." The 2003 survey of British doctors explored taking a "zero tolerance" approach — perpetrators would be permanently stricken from the patient roster and criminally prosecuted.

Schlanger said he prefers education and prevention to punishment. He has now submitted the same request for a research grant to the Labor and Social Affairs Ministry and is awaiting a decision.

"Some solutions could be quite simple, such as making sure there are adequate, comfortable, safe places provided for clients and workers to discuss the clients' cases," he said.

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