Examining Workplace Incivility & Bullying in Long-Term Care

What We Did...

We explored the nature & consequences of workplace incivility & bullying among health care aides (HCAs) working in long-term care (LTC) homes.

We conducted 33 in-depth interviews, 100 hours of observation & reviewed key policy documents.

We worked with 21 HCAs, 6 LPNs, 6 administrative staff & 5 support staff. The HCAs were female, mostly Caucasian & Canadian-born.

Incivility

Refers to low-intensity, deviant acts; violate workplace norms for respectful interactions; characterized by an ambiguous intent to harm.[1]

Bullying

Refers to repeated, misuse of power intended to undermine, humiliate, or injure; characterized by hostility, frequency, persistence and power imbalance.[2]

Together...

Workplace incivility & bullying have the potential to disrupt effective, collaborative & respectful workplace relationships essential to HCA safety & care provision.

References:

1. Andersson, L.M., & Pearson, C.M. (1999). Tit for tat? The spiraling effect of incivility in the workplace. *Academy of Management Review*, *24*, 452-471.
2. Einarsen, S. (1999). The nature and causes of bullying at work. *International Journal of Manpower*, *20*, 16-27.

What We Found...

In contrast to overt acts of bullying, HCAs primarily encountered peer incivility in their workplace relationships. This incivility was pervasive, occurring on an almost daily basis.

"In health care, I've experienced passive aggressive behaviours in a way I never have in any other job & I've had a pretty full spectrum of jobs... It's almost daily from someone, somewhere" ~ Audrey

Common uncivil behaviours included:

Gossip & Rumor-Mongering

"...there's a multitude of staff that I've never worked with directly... But I can tell you it's amazing what I know about those people. Amazing. Or what people want me to know about these people. I don't know whether it's true or not..."
~ Sabrina

Social Exclusion

"...You start your day off at report & seriously the other person will not even say a word to you & you know, you go about your day, there's still no contact, no eye contact, no nothing. They just keep to themselves completely. So then you know not to ask them for help."
~ Emily

Ignoring/Refusing Requests for Help

"...She needs to answer her [call] bells. It drives me nuts, so when I work with her, I have to turn my phone off so I can make her answer her bells."
~ Courtney

Blame & Criticism

"...And she's been thrown under the bus a lot from her team...if there's something wrong with a resident, whether it's their room or their own cleanliness... The other girls will actually blame the situation on Amelie when she actually had nothing to do with it"
~ Chloe

Sabotage

"...there are people that kind of set them [new staff] up... Like if they're not doing something right... instead of teaching them the right way to do something & how to do it properly, it's just like, 'I'm going to watch you kind of fail & then I'm going to go to management."
~ Melinda

Experiences of incivility were impacted by gender & power relations

"But in general women can get really catty. I don't know how else to describe that. And we can try and just pull each other apart... I've not worked ever with a large amount of men, so I don't know if that's the same with them or not. But with women, you get that factor for ...that competition. And it's like it's just too many women in one place?"

~ Brooke
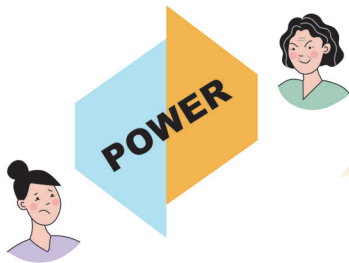
POWER

"...it's almost like it's a power struggle sometimes with them. It's a game. It's this 'I need to be in control personality', right? And if they're not getting along with one person and you shut them down in that avenue then the next thing you know, that employee... is now onto another employee"

~ Kari

Incivility impacted care processes

Requesting Help

"And I probably call for help less, because again, I don't know what their expectations are and if they kind of look at me sideways because I asked for help with something... But I don't want someone else looking at me sideways or thinking I'm incompetent..."

~ Miranda

Receiving Help

"Like me and Amelie, we literally just teamed up and left Rebecca to her own. Because Rebecca would never help us. So we were just like, 'well, if she's not helping us, we're not going to help her', so we kind of did that for probably 3-4 weeks.

~ Courtney

Resisting Help

"...safety becomes an issue as well because care aides are cutting corners... you know, especially if it's not their resident... if they're pissed at you that day because they have to answer the call, they'll just do actually what's necessary rather than what really needs to be done...'

~ Sabrina

Incivility impacted HCAs' well-being

Mental Well-Being

Trepidation around what might happen on shift led to feelings of apprehension & stress, made HCAs reluctant to come to work, & at times led them to call in sick. For casual staff, exposure to uncivil behaviours led them to refuse shifts on certain units.

Physical Well-Being

HCAs reluctance to provide or request assistance with transferring &/or lifting residents put them at increased risk for musculoskeletal injury.

Experiences of incivility are NOT reflected in

- Current provincial legislation & policy – which are narrowly framed within context of masculine patterns of aggression (i.e., direct, overt & physical).

- Organizational policy & union collective agreements – which are primarily framed within language of human rights violations.

What You CAN Do...
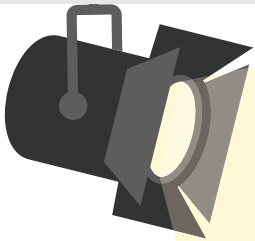
- Use the **online toolkit** (videos, readings, discussion guides) to support conversations around (in)civility

- Provide **space/time** for psychological safety huddles

- Discuss incivility at **Joint Occupational Health & Safety Meetings**

- Ensure nurses have **ongoing support** & training to further develop their leadership skills

- Encourage administrators/managers to be **visible,** to connect with **empathy,** and address instances of incivility as they arise

- Co-create your own team **civility code,** display it at the nursing station & refer to it often

- Provide training opportunities in **respectful communication** & **conflict resolution** to everyone

Remember: A civil workplace is everyone's responsibility ~ if you see something, say something.