

Improving safety for lone workers



A guide for lone workers

THE NHS STAFF COUNCIL
WORKING IN PARTNERSHIP

PARTNERSHIP OCCUPATIONAL SAFETY AND
HEALTH IN HEALTHCARE GROUP

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The Partnership for Occupational Safety and Health in Healthcare (POSHH), working closely with the NHS Security Management Service, has produced this advice to assist employers and managers in dealing with the important issue of staff working on their own and, in particular, to stress the need for robust risk assessment and risk management in lone worker situations.

This document outlines what employers and managers should do to improve the personal safety of lone workers.

An increasing number of NHS staff work alone in community settings such as patients' homes or on outreach work. Lone workers can be vulnerable and at increased risk of physical or verbal abuse and harassment from patients, clients, their relatives or members of the public simply because they don't have the immediate support of colleagues or security staff. It was for this reason that the NHS in England centrally funded and subsidised the provision of 30,000 lone worker devices in summer 2009.

The NHS Security Management Service defines lone working as any situation, or location, in which someone works without a colleague nearby, or is out of sight or earshot of another colleague. Even staff who work in a building with others may be considered lone workers. Lone workers face a variety of hazards. For more information on the hazards associated with lone working please visit the Health and Safety Executive website www.hse.gov.uk

Employers have a duty to protect lone workers by reducing the risks of physical and verbal abuse. Staff can also take a number of practical steps to help improve their personal safety while out and about.

The local security management specialist

The local security management specialist (LSMS) is responsible to the security director for ensuring that the healthcare organisation has robust and up-to-date policies and procedures in place to ensure the safety of lone workers. In liaison with line managers, the LSMS should ensure that these are passed on to all relevant staff, including those responsible for their implementation and to those they are designed to safeguard.

NHS Constitution

As part of the NHS Constitution, the NHS has committed to a number of pledges that relate to providing a high-quality working environment for staff. The provision of lone worker devices relates directly to the pledge in the Constitution to 'provide support and opportunities for staff to maintain their health, well-being and safety'.

What your employer should do

Your employer has overall responsibility for your health and safety at work and has a number of legal duties in order to protect employees.

Risk assessment

Your employer has a legal duty to carry out risk assessments of any activities which present a risk to your personal safety. This risk assessment should identify lone working staff at risk, the dangers they face and the measures that can be taken to prevent and reduce the risk of injury. This assessment should take into account the job you are doing, the environment in which you will be working, the patients you will be dealing with (for example do they have a record of violence), and any factors specific to yourself such as training, competencies, limitations, race, gender, sex and age.

Prevention

When looking at ways of reducing the risk, your employer should firstly look at ways of eliminating the hazard. For example if the risk is caused or increased by you visiting the patient, it may be safer if the patient comes to you and is treated in a safe and secure environment. Alternatively it would be safer if you are accompanied by a colleague on your visit.

Inevitably there may be circumstances when you regularly visit patients on your own. If this is the case your employer must invest in implementing a safe system of work that deals with the risks to lone workers, including a means of discreetly raising the alarm. The NHS Security Management Service has selected the Reliance Protect lone worker solution, which provides a discreet and simple way of raising an alarm if necessary.

Policy

Every organisation needs a policy to inform lone workers about the arrangements that are in place to protect employees, while identifying who is accountable for ensuring the policy is implemented. This should be communicated to all lone working staff, through for example inductions or team meetings.

Training

As part of the risk assessment, your employer has a duty to identify your training needs. While training alone will not reduce the incidence of violence, it's an essential part of an organisation's approach to managing violence and aggression.

Support

Your employer should have systems in place to support individuals following a 'near miss' or an incident of violence or aggression. This could include line management support, such as investigating the incident and putting measures in place to prevent it happening again, advising how to access counselling support, and liaising with the police in the case of prosecutions.

What your manager should do

Your manager plays an important role in ensuring that policies, procedures and risk assessments are implemented locally. Some of the other key roles of managers include:

Sharing information

Where there has been a 'near miss' or an incident involving a team member, it is essential that the information is shared with other team members and colleagues who may be visiting the individual concerned or going into an otherwise risky environment.

Training and supervision

Your manager should ensure that you are able to attend any training related to the management of violence and aggression, including conflict resolution, personal safety and use of lone worker devices. Your manager should also ensure that you have the skills and competencies to work alone safely.

Support

The support of your line manager is essential. If you feel in serious or imminent danger when working alone your manager should support any decision you make to withdraw from the situation to a place of safety. Your manager should also provide you with support following an incident, allow you time to attend counselling if required and follow up and act on incident reports.

What you should do

With good employer and line management support, your job should be much safer. There are still a number of things that you can do to protect your safety and that of your colleagues.

Report incidents

Incidents and 'near misses' provide details about violent individuals, unsafe environments and other important information on the risks faced. You can help your manager and your trust take steps to address these risks to you and your colleagues by reporting incidents.

Attend training

Make sure you attend any training provided by your employer to help you in lone working situations.

Follow the lone worker policy and procedures

Make sure you follow local procedures put in place to protect your safety. This includes guidance on the use of your lone worker protection device.

Assess the risks to your personal safety

When you are going to be working alone, you should assess any immediate and unfolding risks to your safety. This is called 'dynamic risk assessment'. If you feel in serious or imminent danger, you should withdraw to a place of safety.

Make use of your lone worker solution if it is provided

There is now a wide range of technology that can support lone workers as they go about their work. The NHS is providing trusts with the Reliance Protect Identicom lone worker solution. This device provides a discreet and simple way of raising an alarm if necessary and also helps to encourage a culture of dynamic risk assessment. It can also capture audio recordings of verbal or physical assault which can be used as evidence in court.

Your employer may provide an alternative to this system but, whichever system is offered, you should make sure you understand and can use it. If you are supplied with a lone worker device, make sure it is well maintained, charged and is carried with you in line with local procedures.

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Further information

If you have any concerns about your personal safety, contact your manager or your local trade union representative. Your trade union safety representative should be consulted on the development of lone worker policies and risk assessments.

You can find out more about lone worker safety and the devices that are provided for your safety by visiting the NHS Security Management Service website at www.nhsbsa.nhs.uk/SecurityManagement.aspx

A quick checklist

- Have you received up-to-date training in the prevention and management of violence (for example conflict resolution and personal safety for lone workers)?
- Are you aware of policies and local procedures relating to lone working?
- Have you been given all the information about the risks of aggressive and violent behaviour by patients/service users and the appropriate measures for controlling these risks?
- Do you have access to appropriate safety equipment (for example lone worker alarm devices)?
- Do you know how to use and maintain lone worker safety equipment?
- Do you know how to report an incident?
- Do you understand the importance of proper planning before a visit and the need to be aware of the risks and do everything you can in advance to ensure your own safety?
- Do you always leave an itinerary with your manager or your colleagues?
- Do you keep in regular contact with your base?
- Do you carry out dynamic risk assessments during your visits?
- Are you aware that you should never put yourself or colleagues in danger and that, if you feel threatened, you should withdraw immediately?
- Do you understand the circumstances under which a visit can be terminated?
- Do you know and understand your own responsibilities as well as your manager's?

Contact us

For more information on how to become involved in our work, email getinvolved@nhsemployers.org

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