August 15, 2022

Douglas L. Parker  
Assistant Secretary for Occupational Safety and Health  
U.S. Department of Labor  
Occupational Safety & Health Administration  
200 Constitution Avenue, NW  
Room Number N3626  
Washington, D.C. 20210

Dear Assistant Secretary Parker:

I am writing to express the American College of Physician’s concern about the rising problem of workplace violence in the health care sector, particularly among physicians and other health care professionals who administer vaccines. The American College of Physicians is the largest medical specialty organization and the second largest physician membership society in the United States. ACP members include 160,000 internal medicine physicians (internists), related subspecialists, and medical students. Internal medicine physicians are specialists who apply scientific knowledge, clinical expertise, and compassion to the preventive, diagnostic, and therapeutic care of adults across the spectrum from health to complex illness. Internal medicine specialists treat many of the patients at greatest risk from COVID-19, including the elderly and patients with pre-existing conditions such as diabetes, heart disease and asthma.

Physicians and other health care professionals face a growing number of threats, intimidation, and harassment in the workplace. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the incidence rate of nonfatal violence to health care workers grew from 6.4 incidences per 10,000 full time workers in 2011 to 10.4 incidences per 10,000 workers in 2018 and health care and social service industry professionals are 5 times more likely to be injured from workplace violence than workers in other industries (1). In the past decade, the United States Department of Justice prosecuted several instances of violence targeting reproductive health clinics (2). Many physicians, scientists, and public health officials have experienced harassment by anti-vaccination groups and political extremists because of mask requirements, quarantines, and other policies implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic. In Idaho, anti-vaccination groups and other protesters harassed members of a county health board (including a family physician) at their homes (3). California State Senator Richard Pan, a pediatrician and vaccine proponent, was assaulted by an anti-vaccine activist who live-streamed the incident on Facebook (4).

A January 2021 research letter found that a about one-quarter of physicians surveyed have experienced online harassment for a variety of reasons, including their recommendations regarding vaccines; one physician said he received negative online ratings and even death threats from a person with anti-vaccination beliefs (5,6). Incidents like these have taken a toll on the public health community. As of December 2020, 181 state and local public health department leaders have resigned, retired, or been fired during the pandemic, creating a potential leadership vacuum during the vaccine rollout (7). ACP
firmly believes that no one should be subject to harassment, physical, or verbal violence at their place of work, and has repeatedly spoken out to condemn violence against physicians and other health care workers (8,9). In September 2021, ACP adopted policy on Promoting Policy Standards for Workplace Violence Prevention and Management (10). That policy recognizes the harm violence causes, calls for additional research to better understand workplace violence and the most effective interventions, and supports legislative efforts to reduce and prevent instances of workplace violence and bolster workplace safety.

To help prevent future workplace violence, ACP urges the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) and other relevant federal agencies to develop, implement, and enforce a national standard addressing workplace violence in the health care setting. We appreciate the actions the agency has taken, including providing additional training and support for OSHA inspectors, releasing guidance on how to respond to workplace violence-related hazard alert letters, and collecting information on effective and economical workplace violence prevention best practices (11). The agency should release a national standard on workplace violence in the health care sector as soon as possible to prevent injury among physicians and other health care workers who administer vaccines, practice in reproductive health clinics, and provide other crucial medical services.

Thank you for considering this request. Please contact Ryan Crowley, Senior Associate for Health Policy, at rcrowley@acponline.org if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

Ryan Mire, MD, FACP
President
American College of Physicians


