



Health care assistant Anna Morris shares what she learned after being injured at work in 2016.

Peer support part of reducing injuries

By Gillian Burnett

Health care assistants are at risk of injury from acts of violence by the patients they care for. Getting these workers together to share tips, resources, and safe work procedures can add an extra layer of support beyond what they get from their employers.

When health care worker Anna Morris was injured in April 2016, she didn't see it coming: a sudden assault from an elderly resident with whom she'd always had a good relationship. With almost 20 years of experience caring for seniors, Morris was attuned to the potential for aggression, particularly among those with dementia. Nonetheless, it was a shock.

"This was a resident I had known for years," Morris says. "I had known him from before he was deep into his dementia, and I had built quite a rapport with him. I knew he had the potential to be aggressive, but I'd never had an issue."

Things changed the day she was injured: "That day, I went to assist another worker to get him up for breakfast. When I went to put his shoes on him, he rolled onto his side and gave me two swift, hard kicks."

Those kicks left a softball-sized welt on her back, and within a few hours intense pain was radiating from her hip to her neck. She began an intensive journey of chiropractic and physiotherapy treatments, followed by a gradual return to work. Four months after the incident, Morris was finally able to go back full time.

But incidents like these can have lingering effects. "It does cause you to be stressed, and the residents pick up on that," she says.

Preventing injuries through self-care

Acts of violence such as the one Morris experienced are the second most common cause of injury among health care assistants (HCAs) in B.C. These are the 32,000 front-line caregivers in homes, residential care facilities, and hospitals across the province who help dress, bathe, feed, and tend to the daily needs of those who can no longer care for themselves. Eighty-nine percent of HCAs are women, and as a group, they experience the highest number of injuries of any occupation in B.C., accounting for 6 percent of all WorkSafeBC's accepted time-loss claims in 2017.

In long-term residential care, violence accounts for about one-fifth of injuries to HCAs. But across the spectrum of health care environments, the leading

injury type is musculoskeletal; around half of all injuries are caused by overexertion, followed by slips, trips, and falls.

Health care workers routinely perform tasks that involve other people in motion, in intimate situations that require constant compassion. These demands can take not only a physical toll but an emotional and psychological toll on caregivers and their families.

“Health care assistants are really the unsung heroes of health care,” says WorkSafeBC industry specialist Heather Middleton. “They do an incredibly difficult job, and much of it is invisible to the rest of the world.”

Middleton is the former organizer behind the annual Hearts and Hands conference, which launched in 2016. She saw a need for a forum in which HCAs could come together and consolidate their connections, learn techniques to stay safe at work, and talk about some of their unique challenges. The partnership between employers, educators, and WorkSafeBC aims to put HCAs front and centre for the day, celebrating their importance and teaching them how to care for themselves and each other.

At last year’s conference, educator and advocate Elizabeth Causton gave a keynote addressing “The Challenge of Staying Healthy in Health Care.” Through her keynote, she explored ways to maintain passion and joy in the face of work that is complex, demanding, and often deeply personal.

The important question, Causton suggested, is not how to change or eliminate these challenges, but how to respond to them in a way that maximizes health and resiliency. Health care as practised in the Western world, she pointed out, is a problem-focused, solution-oriented care model in which the first and central question is almost always “What is wrong?” A better, more balanced approach would ask instead, “What is going well?” and “What is working?”

“For health care workers in particular, so many factors are beyond their control: how health care dollars are spent, staff shortages, the acuity of those they care for, family dynamics,” said Causton. “We all need to understand what we do control, and then take responsibility for changing it.”

To protect against the stress of over-involvement, she recommends knowing the difference between caring a lot and caring too much.

That message resonated with Morris, who attended Hearts and Hands for two years running. “I come back [to Elizabeth’s ideas] often to remind myself of the multiple layers of how we tend to carry so much with us,” she says. “While I’m at work I give all of myself, but the rest of the time I have to have energy for my kids, husband, and dog.”

Self-care also includes not trying to take on everything yourself. “Sometimes it’s having to wait for someone to help with a two-person job. We think, ‘Oh, I can do it just this once,’ and then that becomes ‘Oh, I can do it again today because I did it yesterday,’ and it becomes a problem.”

Preventing injuries through peer coaching

One of the ways employers are helping health care assistants is through formal peer-support programs. Morris participates in an Island Health peer-coaching program for musculoskeletal injury prevention associated with patient handling. The program targets high-force impacts, repetition, awkward or static postures, and contact stresses. Injury-reduction strategies include using equipment, checking patient risk for falls, and developing safe work procedures. But the key to the program’s success is how the information is communicated: through peers who know the job inside out.

One day a week, Morris is assigned to work throughout the building and help find better ways of handling residents. “If a situation is posing a risk, I try to help problem-solve. Or staff can email me, and I can phone our health and safety advisors.”

Her work in the peer-support program has helped her to focus on safe work procedures during her daily tasks. It’s also reminded her of the value of what she does, and the importance of stopping to reflect.

“Elizabeth really touched me with what she said at the conference. In general, we might feel underappreciated much of the time. But she said we are valued; we are appreciated. She put into perspective just how valued we are.”

Register for Hearts and Hands 2018

Sponsored by WorkSafeBC, SafeCare BC, and the BCFED Health and Safety Centre, the 2018 Hearts and Hands conferences will be held on October 3 in

Victoria and October 17 in Penticton. The events are currently open to more participants and sponsors. To find out more about the conferences, go to hcaconference.ca.

For more information on peer-to-peer learning, check out the SafeCare BC Peer Resource Network. You can find out more by visiting safecare.bc.ca and clicking on Programs. 😊

Tips for self-care in health care from Elizabeth Causton

Are you “giving yourself away”?

Over-investing emotionally can take a toll. These characteristics may indicate that you have been giving yourself away:

- Feeling depressed, forgetful, tense, irritable, nervous, negative, or resentful
- Feeling unable to finish things
- Feeling tired but unable to sleep
- Crying “for no reason”
- Lacking a sense of humour
- Being frequently sick
- Being demanding or quick to anger

- Eating too much or too little
- Withdrawing from family and friends

Focus on what you can control

- Your attitude. Do you focus on the negative or positive?
- Your boundaries. Are you able to maintain them?
- Whether or not you “give yourself away.” Are you over-investing emotionally?
- Your life outside of work. Do you have a life apart from work that you value?
- Your self-care. When and how do you engage in self-care?

Celebrate and Educate Hearts & Hands Conference

for health care assistants

The 2018 Hearts & Hands Conferences for B.C.’s Health Care Assistants are being held in two locations:

- October 3** **Victoria** (Saanich Fairgrounds)
- October 17** **Penticton** (Penticton Trade and Convention Centre)

To register go to: www.HCAConference.ca

