Improving the personal safety for lone workers

A guide for staff
who work alone

February 2018

The Health, Safety and Wellbeing Partnership Group (HSWPG), has produced this advice to assist staff who work on their own and to stress the need for robust risk assessment and risk management in lone worker situations.

This document outlines what your employers and managers should do to improve the personal safety of lone workers and what you can do to protect yourself.

Lone working can be defined as any situation, or location, in which someone works without close or direct supervision; without a colleague nearby, or is out of sight or earshot of another colleague (NHS Protect 2017, Croner 2017). 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, visit the health and safety executive website.

An increasing number of health and social care 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.

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

What your employer should do

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

Risk assessment

Your employer has a legal duty to carry out risk assessments of any work-related activities that present a risk to your personal safety. This risk assessment should identify who might be harmed, the dangers they face and any 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 and competencies.

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 a patient, it may be safer if the patient comes to you and is treated in a safe and secure environment. Alternatively, it may 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 (known as a lone worker safety device). However, it is important that this technology is supported by robust reporting systems that include colleagues knowing where you are and points of contact should you get in trouble.

Policy

Every organisation needs a policy to inform lone workers about the arrangements that are in place to protect employees. The policy should clarify roles and responsibilities, including the identification of those responsible for the effective implementation of control measures. In addition to covering preventative measures, the policy should also state the actions that will be taken following incidents. The policy should be communicated to all lone working staff and anyone else who has a part to play, for example at 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 a key 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, agencies 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. Your manager will also need to agree with you the best ways to support you through the provision of appropriate supervision. This will depend on the risk level and your individual capability. In general, the higher the level of risk and less experienced you are, the greater need for supervision. If you are a new worker or work in a new situation you may need to be accompanied at the start.

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 few things that you can do to protect your safety and that of your colleagues. Remember that you have a legal duty to take reasonable care of your own safety and the safety of others who may be affected by what you do – or fail to do.

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.

Policy and procedures

Make sure you follow the local procedures put in place to protect your safety and the safety of others. 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 device

There is now a wide range of technology that can support lone workers as they go about their work. Some devices are integrated into mobile phones and some are stand-alone units, such as SIM cards within ID badge holders. 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.

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 NHS Protect website.

Things to think about

- 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?

Further reading

NHS Protect: **A guide for the better protection of lone workers**

Chartered Society of Physiotherapists: **Personal safety for loneworkers**

Croner-I: **Lone working in a laboratory**

Health and Safety Executive: **Lone workers**

Royal College of Nursing: **Personal safety when working alone: guidance for members working in health and social care**

TUC: **Guide to health, safety and wellbeing Working alone: A health and safety guide on lone working for safety representatives (stock no 2600)**

UNITE: **Lone working**