Health services – Aggression in emergency departments

What is the problem?
Health service workers being threatened or physically attacked by patients or others in emergency departments.
A large Melbourne hospital had more than 100 incidents of threatening or violent behaviour every month over a nine-month period. Most of the other 22 areas of the hospital received 10-20.

What are the risks?
Factors that can lead to health service workers being threatened or physically attacked in emergency departments include overcrowding, prolonged waiting times, clients under the influence of drugs or alcohol and volatile emotional situations.
Training and procedures lessen the risk of violence, but when the design and lay-out of emergency departments is neglected, the risk becomes greater.

What is a solution to the problem?
The risk of aggressive patients and others can be minimised through the following design measures:
• limited public entry points
• control of access to treatment areas
• comfortable and spacious waiting areas with enough seating for peak-demand times
• safe rooms or secure area for staff to retreat to during emergencies
• clear signage
• private areas for separation of distressed or disturbed people
• wide and screened reception counters
• strategic CCTV monitoring
• queuing system
• bollards to restrict vehicle access near doorways
• phasing out of narrow underpasses or lanes leading to car parks and public transport
• separate staff car parks from visitor/client parking
• duress alarms (desk-based and personal).

Further Information
WorkSafe Advisory Service
Toll-free: 1800 136 089
Email: info@worksafe.vic.gov.au
worksafe.vic.gov.au

Related WorkSafe publications
A workplace handbook for prevention and management of aggression in health services (2008).
Copies of publications can be obtained by contacting WorkSafe Advisory Service or visit WorkSafe’s website.

The problem
An open unscreened reception counter.

A solution
A wide and screened reception counter.