Editorial

Increasing Violent Attacks against Physicians and Healthcare Workers Are Threats to the Korean Society

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Editor-in-Chief, *Journal of Korean Medical Science*

Received: Jan 2, 2019

Accepted: Jan 3, 2019

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Disclosure

The authors have no potential conflicts of interest to disclose.

On 31 December 2018, Dr. Se-Won Lim, a 47-year-old psychiatrist, was killed by his patient at outpatient clinic of a private university hospital in Seoul. The patient stabbed his doctor with a knife. This criminal incident on the last day of 2018 shocked all healthcare workers in Korea. The deadly attacks have increased dramatically over the last year, raising concerns over the safety of medical staff in Korea and the punitive measures against the criminals. Surprisingly, the law on harsh punishments for hospital violence at department of emergency medicine was enacted just a few weeks before the deadly attack.

In 2018, several physicians and healthcare workers were attacked physically and verbally by patients at Korean hospitals. Most of these attacks happened at hospital departments of emergency medicine, but the deadly one took place at an outpatient clinic. Presumably, the reported incidents are just the tip of an iceberg. Numerous cases of minor violence are often neglected and kept secret without finding proper solutions to the issue and without adequate punishments. Such an ignorant practice is primarily due to heavy schedule of doctors and hospital administrators, who wish to minimize conflicts with their patients but do not take an extra effort to upgrade the safety conditions at clinics.

The tolerance of the society to alcohol drinking and the sympathy to patients have caused an increase in hospital violence attacks in Korea. At the beginning of 2018, the attacks were mainly verbal and by hands, but repeated continuously, later on, physicians were hit by medical instruments and, finally, stabbed by knife.

Understandably, physicians stand superior to their patients, who are often emotionally unstable and physically vulnerable. However, the latest deadly attack changes the perceptions of the society, and it sends a strong message to all concerned parties — the patient-physician relationships can turn violent due to intolerance for enduring pain, anger, and dissatisfaction. Undoubtedly, many patients are becoming extremely self-centered and seek quick solutions to their health problems (**Fig. 1**). Such a trend is behind numerous abuses of medical services and aggression toward healthcare workers.

Ideally, doctors should run their clinics in an atmosphere of professional self-confidence and respect of their patients' needs. However, the real situation in Korean hospitals is far from ideal. The lack of comprehensive legal regulations, inadequate fees for doctors' services, and loose safety conditions cause numerous, sometimes fatal, problems.

Fig. 1. Stop threatening the society by Dr. Scifun. Drawn by BS Chung and MS Chung.

Over the last year, some Korean doctors have been even imprisoned and prosecuted because criminal charges pointed to mismanagement and misdiagnosis of their patients. These immoderate and unfortunate events and the uncertainties of the real facts and insufficiencies of the present insurance system damage reputation of doctors and patients' respect toward those who guard their health and wellbeing. The patients are becoming more demanding; they voice their concerns louder. How doctors should act in such an atmosphere of uncertainty, disrespect, and loose safety?

The Korean medical services are distinguished globally for the top quality and financial feasibility. Nonetheless, the current system needs critical rethinking and reforms for major improvements and upgrades. Not just patients, but their doctors too need respect and proper care. When doctors are violently attacked while rendering their services, a zero tolerance strategy should be imposed to prevent any similar incident and dramatic outcomes. At the same time, adequate punishments are needed for misdiagnosis and unprofessional management of doctors with sizable cuts of their salaries or other social punitive measures instead of imprisoning. The decision-makers should prioritize tightened security at all healthcare institutions as well as services at psychiatry clinics and emergency medicine departments.

Patients' violence toward doctors is a global problem; and a global solution is required. Patients and doctors are humans exposed to numerous risks. The cooperation of both parties may improve the situation and prevent numerous violent attacks. Of course, better understanding of the needs and concerns of both parties is required to tighten security at healthcare institutions.

All our thoughts and prayers are with family and friends of Dr. Se-Won Lim. We are all deeply saddened because of the unexpected incident that took life of our respected colleague. And wish him a peaceful sleep in the heaven. Let us all hope that Dr. Se-Won Lim is the last victim of patients' violence in Korea.