

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

MINISTER LAUNCHES ZERO TOLERANCE CAMPAIGN ON ATTACKS AGAINST STAFF

Health Minister, Michael McGimpsey has launched an awareness campaign to reinforce the message that attacks against healthcare staff will not be tolerated.

The Zero Tolerance campaign will be promoted through a public awareness campaign on radio and ads, as well as notices being displayed in hospitals, health centres and GP practices.

All Health and Social Care staff will also receive a Zero Tolerance leaflet providing advice on how to deal with an attack and encouraged to wear a badge reinforcing the message that they will not tolerate any form of abuse.

In launching the campaign, Mr McGimpsey said, **“In the past year alone, there have been around 6,000 cases of abuse against healthcare staff - that is an increase of over 6% from last year. 140 of these attacks were against ambulance staff, 107 were against doctors and an alarming 3,377 were against nurses. These are alarming statistics. Any form of attack is inexcusable, and totally unacceptable.**

“It is appalling to think that those who dedicate themselves to saving lives and to public service should be subjected to verbal and physical abuse.

“That is why I am launching a campaign that will clearly spell out the message of Zero Tolerance. Zero Tolerance on attacks. Zero Tolerance on abuse. Zero Tolerance on threatening behaviour.

“I am alerting the public that it is not, nor was it ever, acceptable to attack healthcare staff. I am also saying to staff to report all incidents. You will be fully supported by your employer.”

The Minister also announced the way forward for the Accident and Emergency Pilot based at Belfast City Hospital.

Mr McGimpsey commented, **“Evidence has shown that the PSNI presence in the A&E of Belfast City Hospital, not only resulted in the number of incidents being reduced by 33% but that staff and service users felt safer and reassured by their presence.**

“I can therefore also announce today that, with the goodwill of the PSNI, the pilot will be extended to January 2008.”

The format of the continuing pilot will see the Belfast City Hospital site and the surrounding Lower Lisburn Road area becoming an official patrol zone. This will mean that the Belfast City Hospital Complex, including the A&E Department will continue to have a high visible police presence during the hot spot times.

The Minister continued, **“I am extremely grateful for the continued support of the PSNI in tackling this issue. On behalf of all the health and social care staff I would also like to thank the PSNI for sponsoring personal alarms for healthcare staff who feel at risk, both within the hospital and community setting.”**

Speaking at the launch, Assistant Chief Constable Drew Harris said: "We welcome the opportunity to be able to support this campaign, as we do all initiatives aimed at reducing violence and aggression against healthcare staff.

“Anti social behaviour in hospitals and attacks on healthcare workers is an issue that police are aware of and are working hard to solve, but it is not an issue that can be solved by policing alone.

“Investing in making workplaces safer and more secure, clamping down on those who display violent or threatening behaviour and backing staff who want to report violent incidents are all steps which have been taken as part of this initiative to address this issue.

“While we hope this campaign will contribute to the development of a Zero Tolerance culture, we will continue to work with each of our partner agencies and will use all available powers to reduce and prevent this totally unacceptable behaviour,” Mr Harris concluded.

Pat McCartan, Chair of the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust, has welcomed the extension of the pilot and the Minister’s continuing help in raising awareness about attacks on staff and for his commitment to pursuing a policy of Zero Tolerance against perpetrators.

Pat McCartan said; “I am delighted that this issue remains a priority and welcome the initiatives announced today which will continue to highlight these totally unacceptable attacks.

"I am particularly pleased to note the extension of the original pilot scheme here at the City Hospital's A& E Department which will now involve a broader police presence in and around Accident and Emergency and the hospital site. I would like to thank everyone who has been involved in these initiatives to date for the contribution which they are making to a safer working environment for our staff."

The Minister concluded: **“This partnership working is helping us to achieve a culture where workplace violence is unacceptable. Everyone must continue to work together to put a stop to attacks and to ensure that the perpetrators face the full rigor of the law”.**

A Zero Tolerance Group has also been created to ensure a continued emphasis on confronting the problem and supporting victims of abuse.