Half of US health care workers say they've witnessed racism against patients: Report

February 15 2024, by Dennis Thompson

Nearly half of health care workers nationwide say they've seen discrimination against patients while on the job, a new report reveals.

While 47% of health workers said they've witnessed discrimination against patients in their facilities, 52% said racism against patients is a major problem, according to the report from the Commonwealth Fund and the African American Research Collaborative (AARC).

"The study shines a light on the discrimination and racism health care workers observe and the implications for negative health outcomes of patients in many communities," said lead report author Henry Fernandez, CEO of the AARC.

"Understanding this connection at a national level is critical to measuring and addressing discrimination in the health care system to mitigate harm to patients and produce better health outcomes overall," Fernandez added in a Commonwealth Fund news release.

For the report, researchers surveyed more than 3,000 health care workers across the United States.

Here's what they found:

- More than half of health care workers (57%) witnessed discrimination against a patient who spoke a language other than English
- About half (48%) said medical providers are more accepting of what white patients tell them than Black patients
- Around half (47%) said dealing with discrimination at work causes them stress

Health care workers at facilities that help more patients of color were more likely to witness discrimination.

About 70% of workers at facilities with predominantly Black patients and 61% of those at facilities with predominantly Hispanic patients

witnessed discrimination, compared to 43% at facilities with mostly white patients.

The survey also found that health care professionals themselves also are subjected to racism.

About 44% of health care workers have observed discrimination against coworkers. When provided examples of workplace discrimination, that percentage rose to two-thirds.

When asked about potential solutions, more than two-thirds of health care workers suggested steps like:

- Anonymous reporting of racism or discrimination
- Better communication with patients and health care professionals of color
- Examination of how non-English-speaking patients are treated
- Training that helps better spot and stop discrimination

"If we are going to build truly equitable health care systems, we have to start by listening to voices of those on the front lines," said report co-author Dr. Laurie Zephyrin, senior vice president for advancing health equity at the Commonwealth Fund.

"Understanding what health care workers are experiencing, and what they want and need from their employers and colleagues to address discrimination, is critical to successful and sustainable change," Zephyrin added.

More information: The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has more about racism and health.

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