

It happened just a couple of days after Christmas, 2006. I arrived at my job as a swing shift RN in the Albany Emergency Department. My first patient was a homeless, alcoholic man who had suffered a seizure. By the time I assumed care of this patient, he had recovered from the seizure, was past the postictal period, and was ready for me to discharge him.

The man had soiled his pants during the seizure, so I went to the clothing locker and got clean duds for him to leave in. I had my back turned to the patient and was bending over to pick up his clothes when I heard him shout "I'm gonna kick your ass!" Before I could turn or straighten up -- or even register what was happening -- the man jumped off the foot of the bed, took two running steps across the room, and struck a massive blow at my head with his fist.

Remember, I was half hunched over with my back to the man when he hit me. I never saw it coming, and never had a chance to do the normal, instinctive things a body does when protecting itself from a blow. He totally caught me unaware, flat-footed and defenseless; my own personal Pearl Harbor.

The running blow struck me directly on my left temple -- that soft, absolutely unprotected spot of brain on the side of your head. I have very little memory of what happened next, although when my co-workers arrived they apparently had to pull me off my attacker -- somehow I had taken him to the floor after the punch.

The immediate effect of this was a terrible concussion, but the actual injury was much worse than that. When my symptoms did not improve even slightly after a week, I consulted a neurologist. He informed me that the blow had destroyed the vestibule in my left ear. The vestibule is the part of the ear that connects to the brain and plays a large role in balance and equilibrium.

The next three months were the worst of my life. Anything that caused any movement to my head -- such as being a passenger in a car, walking to the mailbox, or climbing a flight of stairs -- resulted in extreme nausea, vomiting, vertigo and dizziness. I suffered massive headaches. I had hearing problems in my left ear. I was not able to return to work for 3 1/2 months. In fact, I was unable to do much of anything during that time except sit in a chair. Driving a car was out of the question, even riding as a passenger to my doctor's appointments resulted in hours of nausea and vomiting. I normally weigh about 160 pounds. At the worst of my experience, my weight had dropped to 122, a loss of about 20 percent of my body weight.

Eventually the vestibule healed --- or my brain compensated for the destroyed vestibule, my neurologist still isn't sure which --- and I was able to return to work part time, and eventually full time. I am now fully recovered, although I suffer from a permanent, 20 percent hearing loss in my left ear.

The man that hit me was sentenced to 45 days in the county jail, but served only about 10 days due to jail overcrowding. I was out of work for more than 100 days as a result of this assault --- while my assailant served less than two weeks. That's the thing that I still find extremely galling, the absolute lack of any meaningful punishment for this brutal, senseless and totally unprovoked attack on me. That, and the fact that I was never allowed to testify in court, I was never informed of the trial date, and I was never allowed to tell the judge how miserable my life had become, simply because I tried to help another human being. I was the victim of a brutal assault, but I never got my day in court. Nobody in the legal system cared about me.

And that is why I am so eager to help get this new legislation passed. We may never be able to totally end the problem of workplace violence against nurses. But at the very least we need the protection of meaningful laws that will give true punishment to those who assault us.

In summary, the injury I suffered was horrific. But the insult that was added to the injury (the lack of any real legal consequence for my assailant) was horrific as well. I absolutely feel that the legal system did little or nothing on my behalf in the wake of my injury.

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