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Nurse's killing in workplace spurs changes

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The woman on the other end of the phone line was upset and I knew it wasn't going to be an easy conversation. She had read the rather grisly account of Lori Dupont's death in that morning's newspaper and, as its editor, I took my share of calls from readers about stories they didn't like.

Dupont, 37, was the nurse from Amherstburg, who died on the morning of Nov. 12, 2005, inside Hotel-Dieu Grace hospital in Windsor. Her killer was anesthesiologist Marc Daniel, 50, a physician with whom Dupont had, that spring, ended a tumultuous two-year relationship. She died of blood loss after he stabbed her in the chest multiple times with a military-style dagger in the hospital's recovery room before injecting himself with a lethal dose of an anesthetic. He died three days later in a London hospital.

I braced for what I expected would be a scolding from the female caller about the gory detail in that Monday morning's story. But her complaint took me off guard.

"I'm a nurse. I worked with Lori Dupont. And your newspaper didn't do nearly enough to tell her story and honour her memory," the woman said.

In the months that followed, much more became known about Dupont and Daniel. They'd briefly shared a home. Daniel had previously been disciplined by the hospital for harassment. He had been diagnosed with a mental illness. He had once before made a suicide attempt, from which, ironically, Dupont saved him. And as Daniel's conduct escalated, hospital officials were confused and indecisive about how to deal with him.

The events at Hotel-Dieu Grace on that fateful day have sent out ripples that are still moving outward. The hospital conducted a series of internal investigations. More importantly, however, an 11-week coroner's inquest was held during the fall of 2007 into the murder and the complex set of circumstances that coalesced around the deaths. In addition, Bill 168, amending provincial health and safety legislation by requiring policies and procedures to deal with workplace violence and harassment, was passed at Queen's Park last month. It is set to become law by this summer.

The jury in the Dupont inquest produced 25 recommendations, most of them detailed and multilayered, directed to the Ontario legislature, the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care, the Ontario Hospital Association, Hotel-Dieu Grace, the Ontario Medical Association and more than a half-dozen other governing bodies and government agencies.

Two of the recommendations were that Peter Jaffe, educator and academic director of the Centre for Research on Violence Against Women and Children at the University of Western Ontario, conduct a review of Hotel-Dieu Grace's workplace violence prevention program and train its physicians on workplace violence prevention.

In the months immediately after the deaths, "it was hard for them to keep seeing themselves in the headlines," Jaffe said this week about the Windsor hospital's doctors and nurses. "They went from some staff being in denial and being defensive to being more open."

But the single greatest lesson from the Dupont case, Jaffe said, was the extent to which "domestic violence can affect someone in the workplace" -- that domestic violence and workplace violence aren't separate and discrete problems. One can easily spill over into the other.

Barb MacQuarrie, one of Jaffe's colleagues and community director at the centre, said it was their early work on the Neighbours, Friends and Families workplace-violence prevention program that attracted the attention of the inquest's jury and led to the recommendation for training at Hotel-Dieu Grace. That program is currently on track to reach more than 10,000 Ontario public servants across 21 government ministries by the end of this calendar year. As the name suggests, it emphasizes the roles neighbours, friends, families and co-workers can play in violence prevention.

At the Windsor hospital, which on Christmas Eve settled a lawsuit with the Dupont family, there is a tree in the memorial garden dedicated to the former nurse. As well, there exists a scholarship program in Dupont's name for nurses who wish to pursue additional education.

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