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Patients regularly abuse doctors: research

Doctors are regularly being abused by patients who become agitated while waiting to see them, new research reveals.

Up to 64 per cent of general practitioners have experienced some form of violence in the past year, according to the Australian Primary Health Care Research Institute.

Four doctors have been murdered at work in the past 12 years.

"Patients can be aggressive because they're unwell and they're waiting to see a GP for a long time," Australian National University Associate Professor Rhian Parker told AAP.

"Or they can't get an

appointment to see a GP, or they can't access the things they want from a GP."

The research, released yesterday, was based on face-to-face consultations with GPs from eastern Australia and telephone interviews with doctors from across the country.

It will form the basis of a much larger survey of Australian GPs and their staff examining levels of patient aggression.

"This will be the first national study (of this kind) anywhere in the world," Prof Parker said.

"We need to get information from GPs and their staff about this so we can think about what to do next."

GPs and staff generally regarded patients as being "aggressive" rather than "violent".

Verbal aggression against general practice front desk staff is the most common form of abuse.

Unsurprisingly, female doctors are more likely to be sexually harassed than their male colleagues.

High-level physical violence mostly occurs after hours.

The last GP to be murdered in Australia was Khulod Maaroo in 2006.

She was stabbed in the neck several times at the Hill Medical Centre in Noble Park in Melbourne's east.