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# Strengthening Legal Protection for Healthcare Workers in High-Risk Medical Environments

Hargianti Dini Iswandari[1*], Rinayati[2], Indra Yuliawan[3]
[1]Universitas Bgudi Waluyo Ungaran
[2]Universitas Widya Husada Semarang
[3]Universitas Ngudi Waluyo
**Corresponding Author:** Hargianti Dini Iswandari hargianti.dini@gmail.com

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A B S T R A C T

The increasing complexity of healthcare systems and the escalation of occupational risks in medical environments have intensified concerns regarding legal protection for healthcare workers. The high occupational risks faced by healthcare workers in hazardous medical environments necessitate stronger and more adaptive legal protection. This study aims to analyze the relationship between regulatory frameworks, policy implementation, and the level of legal protection for healthcare workers. Analyzed using descriptive qualitative and quantitative methods. The findings reveal a significant gap between legal norms and practical implementation, particularly in safety standards and protection mechanisms. It concludes that regulatory harmonization and strengthened policy enforcement are essential to enhance effective and sustainable legal protection.



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## INTRODUCTION

The increasing complexity of healthcare systems and the escalation of occupational risks in medical environments have intensified concerns regarding legal protection for healthcare workers. Globally, healthcare personnel are frequently exposed to violence, malpractice claims, and unsafe working conditions, with reports indicating that 8–38% of health workers experience physical violence during their careers (Kiettikunwong & Deeod, 2026). In Indonesia, similar challenges persist, particularly in high-risk settings such as emergency care and hospital environments, where legal uncertainty and occupational hazards remain significant despite regulatory reforms (Budiono et al., 2026). This phenomenon underscores the urgency of strengthening legal frameworks to ensure both professional security and the sustainability of healthcare services.

Recent legal developments, particularly the enactment of Law No. 17 of 2023 on Health, demonstrate a normative commitment to improving legal protection for healthcare workers. Studies by Tamon et al. (2025) and Haryanto et al. (2025) reveal that this law introduces clearer provisions regarding the rights, obligations, and safety of medical personnel. However, empirical findings indicate that the implementation of these legal provisions remains inconsistent, with gaps in enforcement, supervision, and institutional accountability (Tanjung, 2025). Furthermore, healthcare workers continue to face criminalization and legal uncertainty, particularly in emergency medical situations that require rapid decision-making under pressure (Rosnida et al., 2025).

Despite the growing body of literature on health law, several research gaps remain evident. Existing studies predominantly employ normative juridical approaches focusing on statutory analysis (Widjaja & Sijabat, 2025; Alkays et al., 2023), with limited integration of empirical data on how legal protections function in practice. Moreover, prior research often examines legal protection in general healthcare settings without specifically addressing high-risk medical environments, such as emergency units or conflict zones, where legal vulnerabilities are more pronounced (Ginting, 2023). This gap highlights the need for a more comprehensive, evidence-based analysis that bridges normative frameworks with real-world implementation.

Based on these gaps, this study aims to analyze the effectiveness of legal protection for healthcare workers in high-risk medical environments by examining the interaction between regulatory frameworks, institutional practices, and occupational risk factors. The research explicitly seeks to identify discrepancies between legal norms and their implementation, as well as to evaluate how existing policies influence the level of protection experienced by healthcare workers in practice.

This study contributes theoretically by advancing the discourse in health law through an integrated socio-legal perspective that combines normative legal analysis with empirical insights. It enriches existing literature by focusing specifically on high-risk environments, thereby addressing an underexplored dimension of legal protection in healthcare. Additionally, the study offers a conceptual framework for understanding the relationship between legal certainty, occupational safety, and institutional accountability.

Practically, the findings are expected to inform policymakers, healthcare institutions, and legal practitioners in designing more effective regulatory and institutional mechanisms. By providing evidence-based recommendations, this research supports the development of more responsive legal protections, improved enforcement strategies, and safer working conditions for healthcare workers, ultimately contributing to the resilience and quality of healthcare systems.

## THEORETICAL REVIEW

### *Global Risks and Violence in Healthcare Settings*

Healthcare workers operate in increasingly high-risk environments characterized by physical, verbal, and psychological threats. Empirical evidence indicates that workplace violence is a pervasive global phenomenon, with approximately 62% of healthcare workers experiencing some form of violence during their careers (BMC Health Services Research, 2026). Additionally, systematic reviews confirm that violence in healthcare settings occurs across hospitals, emergency units, and primary care, often perpetrated by patients or their families (Önal et al., 2023). Studies by Volonnino et al. (2024) further highlight that such violence is not limited to developing countries but is widespread in advanced healthcare systems, indicating a structural and systemic issue rather than an isolated phenomenon. This growing trend underscores the urgency of strengthening legal and institutional safeguards for healthcare workers globally.

### *Legal Frameworks and Policy Responses*

Legal protection for healthcare workers has gained international attention, particularly after the COVID-19 pandemic exposed vulnerabilities in health systems. A global study by the World Health Organization (2024) reveals that although many countries have adopted legal frameworks to protect healthcare workers, significant disparities remain in implementation and enforcement. Comparative studies by Kuhlmann et al. (2023) demonstrate that policy effectiveness varies depending on governance structures, legal culture, and institutional capacity. Furthermore, international comparative analyses emphasize that legal frameworks often lack coherence and fail to integrate occupational safety, human rights, and criminal law protections into a unified system (Tenbensel et al., 2023). These findings suggest that legal reform must go beyond normative regulation toward more integrated and enforceable policy mechanisms.

***Human Rights and Legal Protection Paradigm***

From a theoretical perspective, legal protection for healthcare workers is closely linked to human rights principles, particularly the right to safe working conditions and protection from harm. Ginting (2023) argues that healthcare workers in conflict and high-risk zones require a human rights-based legal framework that ensures both preventive and responsive protections. This perspective aligns with broader legal theories emphasizing the state's obligation to safeguard essential workers as part of its duty to protect public health. Moreover, the human rights approach expands the scope of legal protection beyond occupational safety to include dignity, security, and access to justice, thereby reinforcing the normative foundation of health law.

***mplementation Gaps and Institutional Challenges***

Despite the existence of legal frameworks, a persistent gap remains between normative provisions and practical implementation. Research indicates that barriers such as underreporting of violence, weak institutional responses, and lack of enforcement mechanisms significantly undermine legal protection (BMC Health Services Research, 2026). Berger et al. (2024) also identify organizational factors, including inadequate training, insufficient security measures, and poor risk management systems, as critical contributors to the vulnerability of healthcare workers in high-risk environments. These challenges highlight the need for a multi-level approach that integrates legal, organizational, and cultural dimensions to ensure effective protection.

***High-Risk Medical Environments and Specific Vulnerabilities***

Healthcare workers in high-risk environments, such as emergency departments, intensive care units, and conflict zones, face heightened exposure to legal and physical risks. Studies show that these environments are characterized by time pressure, emotional intensity, and unpredictable patient behavior, which increase the likelihood of conflict and violence (Berger et al., 2024). In conflict settings, the risks are even more severe, involving direct attacks on healthcare facilities and personnel, as well as limited access to legal protection mechanisms (Ginting, 2023). This context necessitates specialized legal frameworks that address the unique challenges of high-risk medical environments.

***Toward Strengthening Legal Protection: Integrative Approaches***

Recent literature emphasizes the importance of integrative approaches in strengthening legal protection for healthcare workers. Scholars advocate for combining legal reforms with institutional strengthening, workforce training, and cultural change within healthcare systems (Kuhlmann et al., 2023). Furthermore, global policy recommendations highlight the need for harmonization of laws, improved reporting systems, and stronger accountability mechanisms to ensure effective protection (WHO, 2024). These approaches suggest that sustainable legal protection requires not only robust legislation but also coordinated implementation across multiple levels of governance and practice.

## METHODOLOGY

This study employs a mixed-methods approach using a sequential explanatory design, integrating quantitative and qualitative data to comprehensively analyze legal protection for healthcare workers in high-risk medical environments. The quantitative phase examines relationships between regulatory frameworks, policy implementation, and perceived legal protection, while the qualitative phase provides in-depth insights into contextual and institutional dynamics. This design is selected to enhance the robustness of findings through methodological triangulation and complementarity (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2021).

The population comprises healthcare workers operating in high-risk units, including emergency departments, intensive care units, and infectious disease wards in public and private hospitals. A probability sampling technique, specifically stratified random sampling, is applied to ensure proportional representation across professional categories (physicians, nurses, and allied health personnel). A total of 120 respondents are included in the quantitative phase, determined using minimum sample size recommendations for multivariate analysis (Hair et al., 2021). For the qualitative phase, 10 key informants (hospital administrators, legal experts, and senior healthcare professionals) are selected using purposive sampling based on their expertise and involvement in policy implementation, ensuring depth and relevance of data.

Data collection utilizes multiple techniques. The quantitative data are gathered through a structured questionnaire adapted from validated instruments in prior studies on workplace safety and legal protection (Kuhlmann et al., 2023; Volonnino et al., 2024). The instrument employs a Likert scale to measure perceptions of legal protection, safety standards, and policy effectiveness. Validity is tested using construct validity (factor analysis), while reliability is assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficient ($\alpha \geq 0.70$). Qualitative data are obtained through semi-structured interviews and document analysis of relevant legal frameworks and institutional policies. Triangulation of data sources is conducted to enhance credibility and confirmability (Nowell et al., 2021).

The research procedure is conducted in several stages. The initial phase involves literature review and instrument development, followed by pilot testing to ensure clarity and reliability. Subsequently, quantitative data are collected and analyzed to identify general patterns. The qualitative phase follows, where interview data are collected to explain and elaborate on quantitative findings. Data integration is performed at the interpretation stage to ensure coherence between numerical trends and contextual explanations. Ethical considerations, including informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation, are strictly maintained throughout the research process.

Data analysis is conducted using both quantitative and qualitative techniques. Quantitative data are analyzed using descriptive statistics and inferential analysis, including correlation and regression analysis, with the support of SPSS software. Qualitative data are analyzed using thematic analysis, involving coding, categorization, and interpretation of patterns, supported by NVivo software. The integration of findings is carried out using a convergent interpretation approach to generate comprehensive conclusions regarding the effectiveness of legal protection mechanisms. This analytical framework ensures both statistical rigor and contextual depth in addressing the research objectives.

## RESEARCH RESULTS

### *Respondent Characteristics and Research Context*

The study involved 120 healthcare workers from high-risk units, consisting of 45% nurses, 35% physicians, and 20% allied health professionals. The majority (62%) had more than five years of work experience, and 71% reported direct exposure to high-risk clinical situations, including emergency care and infectious disease management. These characteristics indicate that respondents possess sufficient professional experience to assess legal protection and workplace safety conditions. Additionally, all 10 key informants in the qualitative phase held strategic roles, including hospital management, legal advisors, and senior clinicians, ensuring the credibility and depth of contextual insights.

### *Perception of Legal Protection and Regulatory Awareness*

Quantitative findings reveal that the overall perception of legal protection among healthcare workers is moderate (mean score = 3.12 on a 5-point Likert scale). While 68% of respondents acknowledged the existence of legal frameworks regulating their profession, only 41% reported a clear understanding of their legal rights and protections. Furthermore, 57% indicated uncertainty regarding procedures for legal recourse in cases of workplace incidents. These findings suggest that although regulatory structures are formally established, their accessibility and clarity remain limited at the operational level.

**Table 1. Indicator**

| Indicator | Percentage (%) |
|---|---|
| Awareness of legal regulations | 68% |
| Understanding of legal rights | 41% |
| Knowledge of complaint mechanisms | 43% |
| Confidence in legal protection | 38% |

***Implementation of Safety Standards and Institutional Support***

The study found significant variability in the implementation of occupational safety standards. Approximately 64% of respondents reported that safety protocols are formally available; however, only 46% indicated consistent enforcement in daily practice. Institutional support mechanisms, such as legal assistance and incident reporting systems, were perceived as inadequate by 52% of respondents. Regression analysis shows that institutional support has a significant positive effect on perceived legal protection ($\beta = 0.48$, $p < 0.01$), indicating that stronger organizational backing enhances workers' sense of security.

***Exposure to Workplace Risks and Legal Vulnerability***

A substantial proportion of respondents (59%) reported experiencing workplace violence or threats, while 34% had faced potential legal disputes related to clinical decisions. Notably, 61% of those exposed to such risks felt that existing legal protections were insufficient. Qualitative findings highlight that healthcare workers in emergency and intensive care settings are particularly vulnerable due to time pressure, high patient expectations, and limited legal clarity during critical decision-making. These results demonstrate a direct relationship between high-risk environments and increased legal vulnerability.

***Gap Between Legal Norms and Practical Implementation***

The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings reveals a consistent gap between normative legal frameworks and their practical application. While regulations are generally perceived as adequate in theory, their implementation is hindered by weak enforcement, lack of training, and limited institutional accountability. Key informants emphasized that legal protections are often reactive rather than preventive, focusing on dispute resolution rather than risk mitigation. This gap is reflected in the discrepancy between high regulatory awareness (68%) and low confidence in actual protection (38%).

***Comparison with Previous Studies***

The findings align with prior research indicating inconsistencies between legal frameworks and implementation in healthcare systems. However, this study reveals a higher level of perceived legal vulnerability compared to earlier studies, particularly in high-risk environments. Unlike previous research that primarily emphasizes normative legal adequacy, the current results demonstrate that institutional and operational factors play a more decisive role in shaping effective protection. This divergence suggests that legal reforms alone are insufficient without parallel improvements in enforcement mechanisms and organizational practices.

## DISCUSSION

The findings indicate a moderate level of perceived legal protection despite relatively high awareness of existing regulations. This disparity can be more comprehensively understood through the lens of legal consciousness theory, which emphasizes that individuals' perceptions of law are shaped not only by formal knowledge but also by everyday experiences, institutional interactions, and socio-cultural contexts (Chua & Engel, 2022). In this study, although healthcare workers demonstrate awareness of regulatory frameworks including provisions under Undang-Undang Nomor 17 Tahun 2023 tentang Kesehatan their limited understanding of procedural rights, complaint mechanisms, and legal recourse pathways significantly reduces their confidence in the effectiveness of such protections. This suggests that legal norms, while formally established, have not been fully internalized at the operational level. Consistent with previous findings, legal literacy alone does not automatically translate into legal empowerment unless supported by accessible enforcement systems, institutional responsiveness, and practical guidance (Kuhlmann et al., 2023). Therefore, strengthening legal protection requires a multidimensional approach that combines regulatory clarity, continuous legal education, and institutional facilitation to ensure that healthcare workers can meaningfully exercise their rights.

The regression results further demonstrate that institutional support plays a decisive role in shaping perceived legal protection, reinforcing organizational theory which posits that formal rules must be embedded within effective governance structures to yield practical outcomes (Scott, 2021). In this context, healthcare institutions serve as critical intermediaries between abstract legal norms and their real-world application. The findings reveal that inadequate reporting systems, absence of structured legal assistance, and weak enforcement practices significantly undermine healthcare workers' sense of security, even in the presence of formal regulations. This is consistent with earlier studies highlighting that institutional deficiencies often negate the protective intent of legal frameworks (Volonnino et al., 2024). Importantly, this study extends existing literature by empirically demonstrating that institutional variables exert a stronger influence on perceived protection than normative provisions alone. Consequently, healthcare institutions must move beyond passive compliance and actively operationalize legal standards through internal policies, risk management systems, and responsive support mechanisms that translate legal guarantees into tangible protection.

The high incidence of workplace violence and legal disputes identified in this study underscores the structural vulnerability of healthcare workers in high-risk medical environments. Drawing on risk society theory (Beck, 2021), modern healthcare systems are increasingly characterized by uncertainty, complexity, and heightened societal expectations, all of which contribute to elevated levels of both physical and legal risk. The findings confirm prior research indicating that emergency departments and intensive care units are particularly susceptible to conflict, aggression, and litigation due to time pressure, emotional intensity, and critical decision-making demands (Berger et al., 2024). However, this study provides a deeper insight by revealing that legal vulnerability is not solely driven

by external threats such as patient aggression, but is also significantly influenced by ambiguity in legal standards governing clinical decisions under pressure. This ambiguity creates a "grey zone" in which healthcare workers must act swiftly without clear legal protection, thereby increasing their exposure to potential legal consequences. These findings highlight the urgent need for context-specific legal guidelines that explicitly address the realities of high-risk medical practice.

A central finding of this study is the persistent gap between legal norms and their implementation, reflecting the well-established distinction between "law in books" and "law in action" (Tamanaha, 2021). While regulatory frameworks appear comprehensive at the normative level, their effectiveness is substantially weakened by implementation deficits, including insufficient training, weak supervision, fragmented accountability systems, and limited institutional capacity. Unlike previous studies that primarily focus on the adequacy of legal provisions (Widjaja & Sijabat, 2025), this research demonstrates that the core issue lies not in the absence of regulation, but in the failure to operationalize existing laws effectively. This divergence suggests that future legal reforms should shift their focus from expanding regulatory content toward strengthening enforcement mechanisms, improving institutional coordination, and ensuring accountability at all levels of the healthcare system.

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the advancement of health law by integrating socio-legal theory with organizational and institutional analysis, thereby offering a more holistic framework for understanding legal protection. It emphasizes that effective legal systems cannot be evaluated solely based on their normative structure, but must also be assessed in terms of their practical functionality and impact on stakeholders. Practically, the findings provide actionable insights for policymakers and healthcare institutions, highlighting the importance of comprehensive strategies that encompass legal reform, institutional capacity building, and workforce training. These contributions are particularly significant in the post-pandemic context, where healthcare system resilience and worker protection have become global priorities, as emphasized by the World Health Organization (2024).

Despite its contributions, this study is not without limitations. The relatively limited sample size, drawn from selected healthcare institutions, may constrain the generalizability of the findings to broader contexts. Additionally, the cross-sectional design restricts the ability to capture temporal changes in legal protection and policy implementation, which are likely to evolve over time. The reliance on self-reported data also introduces the potential for response bias, particularly in sensitive areas such as workplace violence and legal disputes. Future research should address these limitations by employing longitudinal designs, expanding the geographic and institutional scope of samples, and incorporating multiple data sources, including administrative records and legal case analyses. Furthermore, comparative studies across different countries and legal systems would provide valuable insights into best practices and enable the development of more robust and adaptable legal protection models for healthcare workers globally.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study concludes that legal protection for healthcare workers in high-risk medical environments remains insufficient despite the existence of formal regulatory frameworks. A significant gap persists between normative legal provisions and their practical implementation, particularly in terms of enforcement, institutional support, and accessibility of legal mechanisms. The findings indicate that institutional factors such as the availability of legal assistance, effective reporting systems, and organizational commitment play a more decisive role in shaping perceived legal protection than the mere presence of regulations. Additionally, healthcare workers in high-risk settings face elevated physical and legal vulnerabilities, often compounded by unclear legal standards in emergency decision-making contexts. These results highlight that effective legal protection must be approached holistically, integrating regulatory clarity with strong institutional capacity and operational support.

In light of these findings, it is recommended that policymakers focus on harmonizing and operationalizing legal frameworks by developing clear, context-specific guidelines tailored to high-risk medical environments. Healthcare institutions should strengthen internal support systems, including accessible legal aid, transparent and responsive reporting mechanisms, and continuous legal training programs to enhance workers' awareness and preparedness. Furthermore, improving legal literacy among healthcare professionals is essential to ensure they can effectively exercise their rights and navigate legal procedures. Strengthening enforcement mechanisms through enhanced supervision, accountability, and inter-sectoral collaboration between legal and healthcare authorities is also crucial. Future research is encouraged to adopt longitudinal and comparative approaches with broader and more diverse samples, in order to deepen understanding and support the development of more effective and sustainable legal protection systems.

## ADVANCED RESEARCH

Future research on strengthening legal protection for healthcare workers in high-risk medical environments should move toward more advanced, interdisciplinary, and data-driven approaches. One important direction is the application of longitudinal study designs to capture dynamic changes in legal protection, policy implementation, and occupational risk over time. Such approaches would enable researchers to assess the long-term effectiveness of legal reforms and institutional interventions, addressing the limitations of cross-sectional analyses (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2021). In addition, comparative cross-country studies are needed to examine variations in legal frameworks, enforcement mechanisms, and institutional capacities, thereby identifying best practices and transferable policy models across different healthcare systems (Kuhlmann et al., 2023).

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