PROTECTING COUNTER & INTERVIEWING STAFF FROM CLIENT AGGRESSION

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crime prevention series
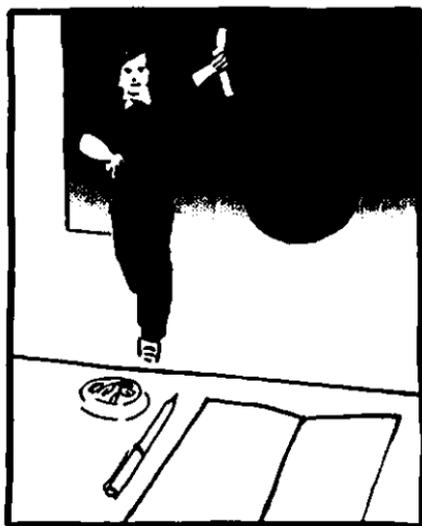
Protecting counter and interviewing staff from client aggression

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Australian Institute of Criminology

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Preface

"People don't seem to handle their anger well any more." These words were spoken by an official of an industry staff association whose members are widely subjected to customer harassment. The comment highlights an apparently growing phenomenon in the workplace: aggression expressed by consumers/clients/customers and others toward service providers.

This sentiment, although simply expressed, is complex in its implications, as the following pages indicate. Although there are some elements common to all instances of interpersonal aggression occurring between public contact workers and their clients, some are situationally specific. This booklet is directed to the needs of a defined group of workers, counter and interviewing officers. The corresponding needs of taxi drivers, police officers or flight attendants, for example, would require a somewhat different approach, despite considerable common ground.

The information and advice contained in this publication are pitched specifically at personnel, office and security managers, although counter and interviewing officers themselves will find it of interest. It cannot be emphasised too strongly that despite the advice offered in these pages, not all of which is supported by research, state-of-the-art-advice should always be obtained from those expert in the various areas touched on before proceeding to plan or implement workplace reforms.

The authors trust this contribution to the reduction of workplace violence will be effective and contribute to an improved quality of working life of counter and interviewing officers. Achievement of such a goal, though, is dependent upon workers themselves appreciating that as a group they contribute in no small part to their own victimisation. A vital element of aggression reduction, then, is improved interpersonal relations skills. Collectively, increased commitment to excellence in the provision of services will do much to improve the working lives of service providers as well as contribute to the quality of life of the community generally (Albrecht & Zemke 1985).

Aggression reduction measures need to be viewed within a coherent framework. Such frameworks vary somewhat from industry to industry but that adopted here is extremely flexible and capable of adaptation to a variety of service roles. Managers and others responsible for client aggression reduction programs should examine the flow model shown at Figure 1 (p.) in the first instance.

Client aggression toward counter and interviewing officers can occur anywhere, at offices large or small, secure or insecure. Thus, physical circumstances and scale of conflict vary greatly from location to location. In order to permit as wide a range of discussion as possible, the needs of larger organisations are implicit in much of the text. However, it is a simple matter for managers to sift through the various materials and select those of relevance to their particular needs.

The Australian Institute of Criminology accepts an ongoing corporate responsibility for the reduction of violence in society generally. This publication is an expression of that commitment.

Introduction

Aggression against employees appears to be growing in a number of Western countries. Certainly, management and some employee groups have become more concerned about the problem in recent years (Poyner & Warne 1986).

Although the physical means of aggression are limited, the range of conditions in which aggression can be manifested is wide. A police officer struck by a prisoner resisting arrest, a post office counter clerk abused by an irate customer, a train guard set upon by drunken hooligans, a welfare officer spat upon by a mentally disordered client and a bank clerk menaced by a shotgun wielding robber, are all examples of the various circumstances in which employees are subjected to aggression. Indeed, so different are these situations, they are best considered separately.

This publication considers aggression manifested by clients/customers toward counter and interviewing staff at counters and in interview rooms. It is predicated on the assumption that job design and job practice influence levels of aggression experienced by employees from clients and others and, that while aggression cannot be prevented entirely, much can be done to reduce it.

The approach adopted is largely prevention oriented both directly and indirectly and primarily directed at those security/protection managers, personnel managers and office managers, concerned to protect their counter and interviewing staff from client imposed aggression in public offices.

Aggression defined

The term "aggression", as used in this booklet, includes any of the following behaviours exhibited by a client to an extent considered intolerable by an interviewing officer acting in the course

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of employment: swearing; insulting; making offensive noises; intimidation by word or deed, including threatening, gesturing, assaulting—by hand, foot or weapon, including pulling hair, touching, pushing, prodding, spitting, stabbing, cutting and/or shooting; complaining, and exposing portions of the human body normally clothed in an office environment. Aggression against employees results in psychological and physical reactions ranging from trivial through serious to, in fortunately rare instances, death. Some aspects of client aggression are highly subjective, for example, swearing, and it is for that reason aggression is best defined by individual employees.

Sexual harassment is a substantial problem in some workplaces, causing great offence to victims but does not fall within the province of this publication unless involving any of the characteristics of aggression itemised above.

Client motivation

Client inflicted aggression in the present context is divisible into four motivational categories: random, instrumental, expressive, and unmet needs. Prevention oriented analysis is difficult without an understanding of this classification.

Random aggression is that aggression manifested by a person experiencing an altered state of consciousness, be it drunkenness, mental illness or whatever. Such behaviour usually lacks a rationale.

Instrumental aggression is that behaviour engaged in by a client in order to influence a counter and interviewing officer to make decisions favouring the client. Most clients are content to use commonly accepted body language, such as smiles and posture, and everyday language, in their attempts to influence employees; but some, more calculating and ruthless than most, will attempt to manipulate by means of aggression.

Expressive aggression or irritation is probably the most frequent single cause of aggression and occurs when clients give vent to their dissatisfaction with the counter and interviewing officer with whom they are interacting and/or the physical environment in which they find themselves and/or the institution with which they are dealing.

Unmet needs Some clients are aggressive due to: unmet physical, emotional, or self-identity needs leading to a desire to

"prove" themselves; displaced anger from past situations projected into current situations; and feelings, attitudes and expectations toward the organisation rather than the issue in hand (Bowie 1989).

Process of client inflicted aggression

The process of workplace aggression is conceptualised at Figure 1. Antecedent events are identified at stage 1. Selection and training of counter and interviewing officers as well as pressing personal problems of both employees and clients, are pertinent considerations here.

At stage 2, client and employee are in proximity but not interacting: the client is in the employee's workplace, perhaps waiting to be served or interviewed, but not yet in personal contact with the counter and interviewing officer. A wide range of architectural and design factors possessing potential to influence client behaviour apply at this point. Administrative factors
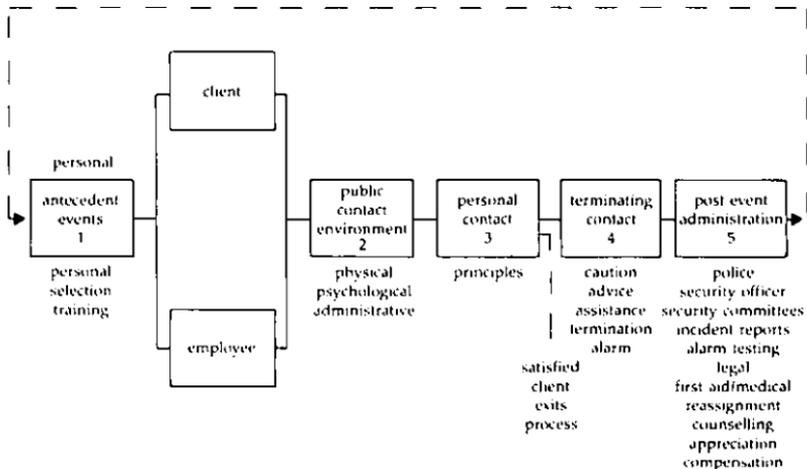
Figure 1: *Process of Client Inflicted Aggression*

are also important, such as appointment times not being adhered to or clients being obliged to queue merely to lodge a document or ask a simple question.

Stage 3 occurs as counter and interviewing officers and clients commence interaction, and a range of interpersonal skills come into play. All being well, employees can concentrate on servicing their clients. But, if all does not go well, officers will have to exercise their interpersonal skills in order to prevent the interaction breaking down.

Once an employee realises a client interaction has either broken down or breakdown is imminent, stage 4 has been reached. It is necessary at that point for employees to follow prescribed office procedures appropriate to their situation.

Finally, once a client interaction has been terminated by reason of aggression there remains a number of consequential tasks to be undertaken in order to cater for all possible post aggression outcomes. Tasks range from medical examination in cases of assault through counselling to legal action. These tasks are performed during stage 5. Selected information gained during this stage should be fed back into the interviewing system and so used to improve the quality of service, for example, by making procedures simpler or revising training materials in the light of newly emerged circumstance. Advantage should be taken of every failed staff/client interaction to improve staff protection and enhance customer service. This refinement process is indicated at Figure 1 by means of a feedback loop.

Antecedent events

Managers make many important contributions to the minimisation of client aggression by taking antecedent events into consideration. Three aspects of antecedent events are particularly important: personal problems—of both employees and clients; selection of employees; and training of employees. Some aspects are more easily addressed than others.

Personal problems

Few employees have no problems. For most it is a matter of how much or little personal concerns impinge upon their workplace behaviour. Such problems might concern relationships or health, they might involve debt or any of a hundred other worries.

Thus, each party to an interview or other counter interaction brings to that event their own unique cluster of concerns. Those overburdened with personal problems find their capacity to interact impaired. Employees operating at the organisation-public interface should be alert to such factors. Should they feel "off colour" or otherwise doubt their capacity to cope with their duties on a particular day or with a particular client, they should inform their supervisor.

Managers should encourage such action (within sensible limits) on the part of their subordinates. Below par officers staffing busy counters are a threat to performance. Customer service deteriorates, organisational reputation suffers and employees put themselves at increased risk of client aggression.

Larger organisations and offices generally possess sufficient resources to rotate staff in response to such exigencies without disrupting routine operations. There is usually less flexibility in small offices. Wise managers compile lists of casual employees who know the field, such as former employees, who can be

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called upon at short notice to keep their counters and interview rooms fully staffed.

Clients have their own problems. In some cases, a client's problem is the subject of an interview, such as a homeless person's application for temporary accommodation or a defaulting taxpayer required to justify his non-compliance. Managers for the most part have less opportunity to control the behaviour of clients than they do employees. But, there are ways in which the disposition of presenting clients can be favourably influenced.

Factors such as locations of offices and hours of public contact can significantly impact the personal problems of clients, either by aggravating them or by constituting a problem in themselves. Awkward business hours and out of the way locations create substantial hardship to those without transport or who work normal office hours. In a more direct sense, regular clients known to possess behavioural or other problems, caused perhaps by epileptic or neurotic conditions, can be seen by appointment. By making their attendance known in advance, preparations, such as ensuring the presence of an experienced interviewing officer and/or a security officer, can be made.

Files (electronic or paper) of potentially violent clients who periodically attend offices for interview can be flagged to that effect. Supervisors and interviewing officers are thereby warned in advance of potential problems. The possibility of a Freedom of Information request to access such files should be considered in such circumstances.

Selection

Counter and interviewing officers are frequently appointed to their positions with little regard to their ability to deal with people. Ideally, counter staff and interviewing officers required to deal with the public continually should be mature extroverts, especially in those agencies implementing unpopular public policies and practices.

Persons possessing racial, ethnic and cultural biases, are unlikely to be well suited to counter and interviewing duties; nor are the immature and introverted.

Aggregate levels of aggression inflicted on counter and other interviewing employees vary greatly according to industry. Ap-

plicants for counter and interviewing positions in those industries and services in which client aggression is identified as a problem or as an emerging problem should be assessed as to their suitability for the task. Desired personality profiles are not difficult to prepare. Neither is it a complex task to match applicants' attributes against these. Not all client aggression is randomly inflicted on counter and interviewing officers. Poor employee attitudes attract negative client reactions, and staff manifesting continually poor attitudes will attract a greater degree of aggression than those projecting more positive attitudes.

A study undertaken by Coopers & Lybrand W.D. Scott on behalf of the National Training Council (1988) identified a number of attitudinal criteria relevant to intending counter and interviewing officers' performance:

- a basic liking for others (friendliness);
- outgoing, extrovert manner;
  positive attitude to serving others—active rather than passive style;
  and
- unprejudiced (non-discriminatory) attitudes.

The study expresses doubts as to the extent to which these attitudes are trainable.

This advice poses short-term problems to managers in that an important qualification for public contact duties in many industries is grasp of technical detail, whether it be knowledge of welfare benefits, transport timetables, migrant services, document drafting or whatever. The imposition of attitudinal qualifications could severely limit the supply of acceptable applicants in some organisations. In the longer term, of course, solutions will sometimes be possible through recruitment and training initiatives.

It is recognised, though, that ideal conditions rarely exist and that staff assigned to counter and interviewing duties—even in areas in which client aggression is identified as a problem—will not always be psychologically well suited to their duties even though they possess required expertise in their various subject areas.

Another problem is the rapid turnover of public contact staff in many offices. Even well suited and trained counter and interviewing staff require a period of years in which to develop their

knowledge and hone their interpersonal skills. The fact that some public contact staff lack physical and emotional maturity as well as experience, poses problems to supervisors regarding assignment, supervision, training, development and so on.

Some counter and interviewing positions deal with a high proportion of stressed persons, whereas others do not. Some possess a monopoly of the service provided, for example, unemployment benefits, whereas in respect of others, a client exercises choice, for example, investment advice. Considerations such as these determine in part aggregate levels of client aggression. Effective public contact staff selection procedures will take such factors into account.

Training

Counter and interviewing staff training comprise two facets. One involves knowledge peculiar to the function fulfilled by an employee. For instance, if one worked at an airline ticket counter it would be impossible to provide satisfactory service without a basic knowledge of airline schedules and ticketing procedures, ability to handle the various technological aids provided, and so on. The other aspect involves the interpersonal skills of employees; a pleasant, positive manner, a service oriented approach, capacity to work under pressure and the skill to mollify disgruntled customers. The quality of service provided to clients overall is as dependent on these factors as it is on an employee's product knowledge. Some employees naturally possess better interpersonal skills than others; but, all public contact staff require formal training if they are to achieve necessary minimum skill levels, and implement organisational policies.

Larger organisations usually possess greater resources for the implementation of training and other forms of staff development but, whatever the size of an agency or office, it is a manager's responsibility to ensure public contact staff are trained to an acceptable work standard. There are two compelling reasons underpinning this advice. Firstly, the lower the aggregate level of service provided clients/customers by employees, the greater the degree of client inflicted aggression is likely to be. Secondly, there is an obligation on employees to provide sound advice to clients/customers with regard to matters of substance. The legal principle involved was expressed in the High Court of Australia

in the 1981 case *L. Shaddock & Associates v. the Council of the City of Parramatta* (150 CLR, 1981–82, pp. 225–57). Murphy J. stated:

> In general, a person who makes a negligent mis-statement in circumstances where he knows or should know that the person or persons to whom the mis-statement is made may rely upon it, is liable in damages for loss sustained by the person or persons as a result of relying on the mis-statement (p. 257).

According to the now defunct Federal Public Service Board (1982), the principle applies to both oral and written information and advice.

Supervisors' responsibilities

Supervisors of counter and interviewing officers have a particular responsibility to ensure their staff:

- enjoy management support in the responsible exercise of their duty;
- are aware they will be supported in the event of client aggression;
- are aware of the duties and responsibilities of guards (where assigned);
- are familiar with the operation of duress alarms; and
- are aware of their rights as well as their responsibilities when dealing with aggressive clients.

Management's responsibilities

Management possesses a responsibility to ensure staff are informed and developed in the best way possible to cope with client aggression. However, in very small (often voluntary) organisations, interviewing officers or counsellors may constitute the bulk of the staff. In such cases, it is desirable that such officers be aware of the responsibilities normally associated with management and consistent with their circumstances.

Management's responsibilities might include:

- issuing and revising guidelines concerning client aggression, to contain information and advice concerning:
  —staff attitudes
  —emergency procedures, including operation of duress alarms

—interview termination procedures
—legal considerations
—incident reporting;

- keeping staff regularly informed of cognate matters through staff development programs, in-house publications, notice-board bulletins, etc.;
- ensuring meaningful statistics are maintained and analysed concerning client aggression, and updating of procedures in light of such analysis;
- ensuring a register (perhaps computerised) of aggressive clients is maintained and their files flagged accordingly;
- ensuring physical security is adequate; and
- ensuring sound administration of counter and interviewing duties.

Public contact environment

The overall design of offices and other workplaces in which public contacts are routinely effected warrants careful consideration from a client aggression perspective. This advice applies to the planning of new buildings as well as the layout of leased or other already occupied premises. In some industries, merchandising for instance, client aggression is not normally a concern, but in some welfare areas, employee safety is a very real concern. Consequently, the degree of risk determines the level of consideration given by designers and planners to the aggression factor. It should not be forgotten that risk or threat levels can shift significantly over time and, thus, what is adequate today will not necessarily be adequate tomorrow. Given the lead time necessary to modify most public contact environments, planners must constantly think well ahead.

It should be borne in mind by managers that some factors which lead to aggression among clients, such as thermal control, will have similar affects on employees.

In the aggression context, office/workplace design may be viewed from two principal perspectives: public contact area design factors generally, and protection-specific design.

Design

The number of factors considered in design is considerable. Some, such as ergonomics, anthropometry, and furniture and equipment, are not closely associated with present concerns and are not considered further here. Those wishing to read further in such areas are referred to Office Design at Work (Department of Science and Technology 1982) in the first instance.

The factors addressed in the remainder of this section all possess indirect implications for protection. Only general advice can be offered as conditions vary greatly between locations as well as industries. Local factors, such as agency functions, economic conditions, building structure, season and employee morale, all operate to modify advice offered here.

Corporate image

Image is considered important by large agencies, especially those striving for national identification and/or consumer loyalty, such as the Commonwealth Employment Service or financial institutions. It is important at the outset for managers and designers to agree on the level of need for corporate image and the means by which it should be pursued. Competitive industries clearly have such a need but those exercising monopolies such as police organisations or the Australian Taxation Office, for example, have no pressing need for an image based on appearances.

Emblems and logos Corporate image can be developed and projected in a number of ways. Corporate emblems, badges and logos, are currently popular in large organisations and will probably remain so for the foreseeable future. Provided there is nothing culturally offensive in an emblem or logo, such matters possess little of consequence to client aggression.

Physical presentation Physical presentation, however, is more problematic. Opinions vary on the desirability of common decorations, colours, clothing, and so on in the context of corporate image promotion. Even managers within the same industry or bureaucracy differ markedly on the subject. Some managers and staff prefer standardised environments, to the fullest extent possible, claiming they minimise local decision making on such matters. Others feel corporate colours, furniture, and layouts, are overly constraining and that insufficient flexibility is permitted in adapting to local conditions. "What's suitable for Hobart is unsuitable for Darwin" is a comment frequently heard when such matters are discussed. Given the range of factors that can be included in corporate images, there is clearly room for compromise between the competing views.

Limited interviewing of clients in several Federal Government public offices suggests that corporate image is irrelevant in these cases. Client priorities were threefold in all cases: prompt service, efficient service, and depart the premises as soon as possible. However, adverse client impact can arise when standardised colour schemes or motifs result in jarred sensibilities. Different perceptions of symbols and patterns may result in delight to some and offence to others. Some people, for example, find art deco motifs displeasing. It is not suggested that a

client who dislikes art deco will immediately assault the first public contact officer encountered in a public office so decorated. However, it is suggested that an already anxious client kept waiting for an unreasonable length of time in a poorly lit waiting room on a hard seat might just find that an art deco motif will be sufficient to exhaust his patience.

On the other hand, agencies operating competitively in the private sector may well have a need to establish a corporate image. A clearly identifiable emblem or logo would be necessary in such a case. The extent to which other interior design factors would be relevant to image creation is beyond the scope of this book.

Corporate image is not only conveyed to clients by means of emblems and colours. It is also a product of service and public perceptions of effectiveness. Good design should contribute to both. Public contact areas should be designed with the needs of both staff and clientele in mind, including the disabled. Sound design helps promote a public perception of controlled, effective, considerate staff concerned with the affairs of their customers. It is not, of course, a substitute for committed, effective and considerate staff. Those wishing to read further on the subject of office design are referred to the Federal Government's *Code of Practice, Offices* (Department of Employment and Industrial Relations 1983) in the first instance.

Ventilation and thermal control

Ventilation and thermal control of buildings are important elements in determining the emotional control of their occupants. A stuffy atmosphere or thermal extremes can lead to frayed tempers among both staff and clients and, more importantly given the present context, between staff and clients. The trend to larger office buildings and air conditioning/reticulation has brought these two factors to the forefront of building design. Regrettably, air control systems are often inadequate and managers need to monitor them constantly. More than that, managers need to have procedures in place designed to cope with air control system malfunctions when they arise. Procedures should include office evacuation when designated minimum and maximum temperatures are exceeded, as well as prompt hiring of coolers/heaters when necessary.

All public contact areas should be well ventilated and temperature controlled. One of the penalties sometimes associated with effective ventilation and temperature control of public buildings is the invasion of such buildings by indigent or distressed persons at times of extremely hot or cold weather. Appropriate access controls should be implemented in those offices where this presents as a problem.

Temperature control assumes special importance in public contact areas of buildings in which clients are required to wait for lengthy periods. The experience of waiting in itself is also sufficient to irritate severely clients possessing Type A personalities, that is, those who naturally react to stressful situations with annoyance and aggression. That irritation can be powerfully magnified if the environment is either excessively cold or hot. Excessive heat and cold also magnify the discomfort of clients having young children with them. Uncomfortable children are often ill-behaved children. Parents in the company of ill-behaved offspring are usually irritated people as are other clients in proximity to such situations.

Those wishing to read further on the subject are referred to the Federal Government's *Code of Practice, Ventilation and Thermal Control* (Department of Employment and Industrial Relations, 1983) in the first instance.

Seating
Seating is critical in all public contact areas in which any degree of waiting is involved. Public offices, waiting rooms, concourses and similar places in which clients are kept waiting should cater for the seating needs of the elderly, the weak, the disabled and the pregnant, as well as the able-bodied.

Important considerations associated with seating are: comfort, hygiene, durability, and positioning. All can influence a client's emotional state and, thus, lead to aggression.

Comfort is partly determined by waiting time. Clients required to wait for only short periods of time can make do with harder seating without becoming irritated. However, if clients are required to wait for periods of ten minutes or more, softer seating is indicated.

Public seating needs to be selected with great care. In areas in which extended waiting is common, such as at airports and

coach stations, soft seating is warranted. Generally, though, thought should be given to the elderly and the partially disabled. Nothing could be more irritating to elderly persons with lower back pain than to have to lever themselves down into and up from low set, ultra-soft seating. Moreover, seats should have arms so that occupiers may, if necessary, be able to lever themselves upright.

Hygiene Some seating fabrics do not wear well and stain easily. Such public seating, not uncommon in government public offices, is offensive to clients and may serve to magnify any negative sentiments they may be entertaining at the time. Some fabrics are difficult to clean after being soiled by coffee, chewing gum, children, and the incontinent, for example, and additional costs are incurred if the stain is to be removed. Stain proofing should be considered. Initial costs would increase but subsequent cleaning costs would reduce drastically. Of course, where waiting times are brief, plastic seating avoids many hygiene-related disadvantages associated with fabric covered seats.

Positioning The positioning of seating in public waiting areas is important. Attention should be given to: personal space needs of clients; possible demeaning of clients through excessive regimentation of seating; and avoiding a layout which could provide an audience for extrovert younger clients.

Seating should be either individual or bench type but not designed for two persons only. Dual seating runs a risk of personal space invasion by strangers. Seats should not be concentrated in too small an area for the same reason. Commonsense, empathy and experience, will generally indicate seating concentration limits. Unfortunately, such guides are often ignored and there are numerous examples in both public and private sectors of poorly positioned seating. Obvious examples include excessive concentration and being placed in strong sunlight.

The amount of space available and the distance between people is an important element in the environment. In the contexts of both seating and queuing, the intimate zone is significant. Ethnic groups vary considerably in their preferred distances. According to Johnathan Freedman (1975), Americans, Britons and Canadians prefer to stand far apart. Europeans are said to

Poor seating
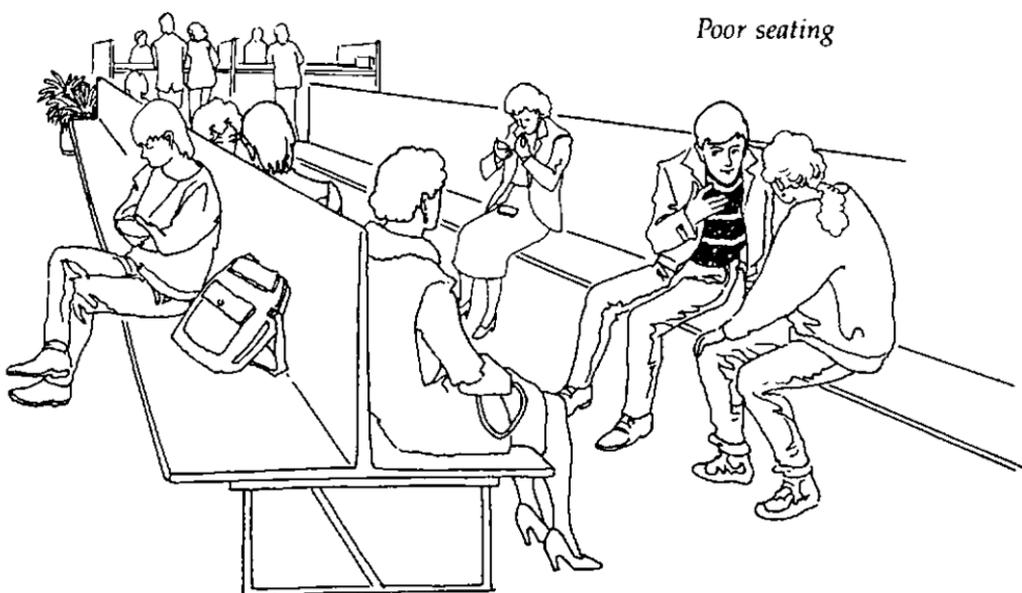
like standing somewhat closer, while Latin Americans prefer standing closer still. There are insufficient research data available to permit an exhaustive listing of interpersonal distance preferences by ethnic group. However, it is noted that when ethnic dissimilarities are most pronounced, spatial preferences are greatest. The essential principle is that there is no "proper" or "ideal" distance. It is a matter of preference.

There is some evidence indicating that persons experiencing high tension have a need for greater interpersonal distance than others (Long 1984; Meisels & Dosey 1971). Thus, those offices customarily catering to stressed persons, such as welfare and taxation offices, might usefully consider the density they impose upon clients in waiting areas.

Public seating is often so designed and distributed that it leads to intrusions of the intimate zone of the persons using it. As a result, awkwardness and uneasiness may occur, thereby increasing potential for aggression by clients. Seating layout is also

important to the social comfort of clients; differing patterns significantly affect levels of client interaction (Collett & Marsh 1980).

The deficiencies of much public office seating are best demonstrated to managers by their visiting a variety of such offices and sitting for 15 minutes on the chairs or benches provided. Seating does not exist in isolation from people and their accoutrements. Thus seating has to be arranged bearing in mind that young children may be running around, and that brief cases, shopping bags and strollers, all may occupy what looks like clear space on a seating plan. Add to those factors the normal passage of adults walking to and fro, and clients sitting with their legs crossed in front of them, and a seating area can soon become short of space in practice.

Positioning of client seating should also take into account eye contact. Seats should not be placed so that their occupants are directly in eye contact over short distances. Direct eye contact is embarrassing to many people as they feel obliged to turn their heads in order to avoid the experience. Although unlikely to lead to aggression in itself, the necessity to turn one's head so as to avoid eye contact during a period of waiting does create an additional element in a client's stress load (Ellsworth et al. 1972).

The negative consequences on a client's disposition of hard and poorly positioned seating should not be underestimated. Combined with other unsatisfactory conditions, such as a long wait and brusqueness on the part of a counter officer, poor seating can result in high levels of client aggression.

The size of waiting rooms, as well as the number of persons contained in them, are relevant to the effective comfort of clients. For example, it is generally more acceptable to be in a large rather than a small room (Sundstrom 1975). Excessive crowding, that is, person density, has the effect on some persons of making them withdraw from social contact (Zlutnick & Altman 1972). One might conclude that at least some clients subjected to crowded waiting conditions will be less than cooperative by the time they are attended to by a counter and interviewing officer. *Catering for children* In some areas clients attending public offices for service rarely take children with them. In others, considerable numbers of young children can be expected in waiting rooms.

As anyone who has ever waited in an airport lounge can testify, being subjected to other peoples' children running or crawling about in a confined area can be an intensely irritating experience. Consideration should be given to providing separate seating areas for persons accompanied by children in those offices where children are likely to be present. Small nursery areas, complete with books and toys, designed to occupy very young children is a partial solution often used by designers and enterprising managers.

Colour

Colour and light are important factors in public waiting area design. Some colours (and combinations of colours) are said to promote passivity, others to encourage aggression (Kenton 1984). According to E. Schachtel, a colour researcher, "Colours . . . are felt as exciting or soothing, dissonant or harmonious . . . joyous or sombre, warm or cool, disturbing and distracting or conducive to concentration and tranquility" (cited in Kenton 1984). In particular, the colour red or red light is said to stimulate the body—increasing blood pressure and skin conductivity—and to increase normal muscle tone. Blue, on the other hand, is said to encourage a fall in blood pressure and skin conductivity as well as reduce muscle tension. Care should be taken, though, when selecting shades of red for, despite the alleged stimulative properties of the hue, the shade pink is tranquillising.

Agencies with clienteles drawn from specific socio-economic or cultural groups should carefully consider the preferences of their clients. Upmarket colours and motifs which homeless or destitute people may find offensive might delight middle class business people. Public offices situated in areas containing concentrations of Aborigines or ethnic groups should be decorated in colours and motifs culturally acceptable to those groups rather than a colour scheme determined by considerations of corporate image or preferences of a minority of users.

Geography also impacts colour design decisions. A public area colour scheme consistent with tropical Darwin would almost certainly be inconsistent with one reflecting Hobart's temperate clime. Decorations designed for public waiting areas in coastal locations might well be inappropriate in inland centres. These and other considerations militate against the imperatives of corporate image promotion by such means.

Another facet of colour holds implications for crowding stress among waiting clients. Designers have long been aware that light coloured, red toned interiors appear larger than dark coloured interiors of the same size. As Baum and Davis (1976) observe, clients sensing a given waiting space as large will tolerate a greater density of fellow waiting clients.

It is undeniable some colours at least impact human mood and therefore behaviour, especially when subjects are exposed to them for lengthy periods in waiting rooms or areas. The extent to which they exert influence is, however, variable and not yet fully understood. Managers and designers should carefully consider factors such as projected client average waiting times, culture and location, when making decisions concerning colour.

Light

Inadequate illumination, especially where reading is made difficult, can lead to irritation among both staff and customers. Such potential for interactive friction is clearly to be avoided. Problems associated with inadequate lighting include glare and eyestrain, conditions which may also induce irritation.

Fluorescent lighting, widely used in public buildings, should be employed with care as certain forms are said to encourage particular emotional states. Design architects should be consulted concerning such esoteric matters. Those wishing to read further in this area are referred to the Federal Government's *Code of Practice, Interior Lighting and Colour* (Department of Employment and Industrial Relations 1983) in the first instance.

Toilet facilities

Although staff toilet facilities are necessary in all workplaces, the provision of toilets for clients is more problematic as well as being subject to the provisions of local building codes. It is certainly not a good idea to have a single set of washrooms used by both staff and clients although it is a common practice in many government and private sector buildings where considerations of economy outweigh dictates of security. Sometimes, too, the toilets are located in staff areas and public use requires client access to staff areas—a practice not recommended on security grounds.

In some locations local residents use toilets provided for client use in public buildings as public lavatories. Such traffic almost inevitably results in odiferous and unhygienic toilets, which are offensive to bona fide users. Consequently, some public offices no longer provide toilet facilities for clients.

Drug deals are thought to have been effected in certain metropolitan public office toilets and in those same facilities considerable vandalism has occurred, ranging from kicked in door panels to arson. Decisions not to provide client toilets in such circumstances are understandable even though lengthy waiting times may be necessary for at least some clients. The decision is an important one: it should be made on a location by location basis and should be carefully weighed in terms of competing advantages and disadvantages. Certainly, bona fide clients obliged to wait for service can be seriously discomforted by lack of toilet facilities, an experience calculated to promote intense irritation on their part. The relevance of toilets and other facilities to the reduction of antagonism in public offices was noted in the O'Keefe report on the quality of service offered by the Department of Social Security (1989).

Problems posed by toilets is magnified in those agencies possessing numbers of mothers with very young children among their clients. Young children typically give little warning of their need to use a toilet. Thus, a parent obliged to leave a building in which she has business in order to urgently find a toilet elsewhere is unlikely to be in a positive frame of mind when eventually served.

Those wishing to read further on the subject are referred to the Federal Government's relevant *Code of Practice, Personal Facilities* (Department of Employment and Industrial Relations 1982) in the first instance.

Client access to staff areas

An important issue within the broad scope of staff protection is that of client access to staff areas. The issue is more appropriately addressed in the context of building security. Comment is confined here to noting the fact that disturbed, dissatisfied or other potentially violent clients could inflict their aggression on employees within exclusively staff areas and not necessarily at public counters or in interviewing rooms. Members of the public

should be excluded from staff areas and facilities in all agencies and buildings in which client aggression presents as a problem. Ideally, the issue of client access controls should be considered at the design stage in the case of new buildings.

Counter and interview room design

The wide variety of premises, rarely purpose built, occupied by agencies employing counter and/or interviewing personnel precludes a standardised approach to counter and interview room design. For example, public counters in cash offices require anti-bandit features to be incorporated in their design, whereas simple inquiry counters rarely require such extreme precautions.

The diversity of functions transacted at counters and in interviewing rooms is a further impediment to standardised design. Different agencies and locations experience varying levels of aggression among their clienteles. Aggregate client aggression also varies according to season and economic climate. Aggression among welfare recipients will be lowest at times of full employment and a booming economy, and highest at times of low employment and recession.

Local experience is the best guide to such matters but this should be considered in light of shifting demographic and population distribution patterns, and the demands of staff associations. Generally speaking, it is preferable to opt for worst case scenarios during design development.

Counters

Many factors affect counter design. Display is the prime consideration in retail premises, whereas in banks thought has to be paid to preventing robberies. Counters need to be both functional and yet provide protection to counter officers from clients. Safety of public contact officers must always be a prime consideration, and realistic threat assessments need to be undertaken at the design stage.

Counters in offices in which client aggression is considered a problem should incorporate the following characteristics in addition to those required for effective operation:

• be of sufficient height to make it difficult for an adult to climb over;

Tall claimants leaning over the counter can sometimes tower over a smaller clerk on the other side adding to any feelings of intimidation. Comfortable eye contact in this situation is much more difficult to achieve.

(Adapted from *Aggressive Behaviour by Claimants,* courtesy The Tavistock Institute of Human Relations).

- be of sufficient width to make it difficult for a client to strike a counter officer;
- be divided along its width with vertical partitions to provide a degree of privacy;
- be fitted with a lateral fixture no higher than 80 cm above the working surface, designed to inhibit downward blows by a client;
- each workstation at a counter be provided with a duress alarm button;
- the ends of inquiry counters should be closed, thereby preventing a client from walking around the end of a counter into staff areas;
- entry doors from the staff side of inquiry counters into staff working areas should be full height and fitted with a one-way vision laminated impact resistant glass view panel;

Many claimants were observed leaning on counters, often taking their weight on one foot with arms outstretched and hands on the counter or leaning on their elbows.
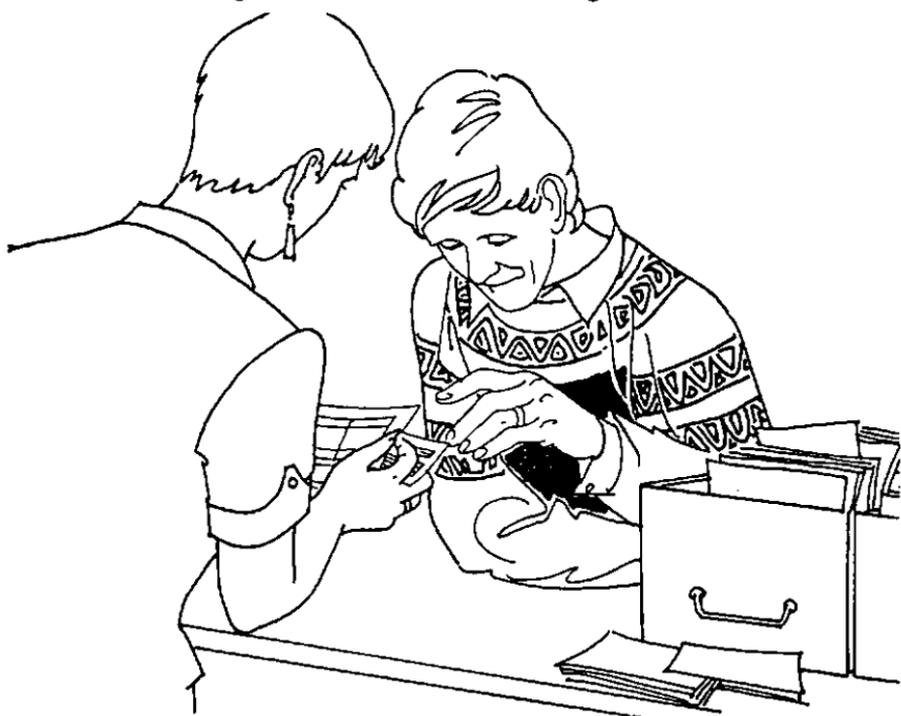
One consequence of this leaning behaviour is that the interpersonal distances between staff and claimants are very close, particularly with no counter screen.

(Adapted from *Aggressive Behaviour by Claimants*, courtesy The Tavistock Institute of Human Relations).

- entry doors from public waiting areas into staff areas should be controlled by electrical or mechanical code locks. Frames and doors should be of sturdy construction;
- walls separating counter officers from staff areas, that is, partitions to the rear of counter officers when facing clients, should be fitted with glass windows and lateral louvre blinds or similar on the public side to give privacy to employees on the staff side, whilst at the same time enabling staff to invigilate the public area;
- be fitted with optional seating for both clients and staff; and
- access to counter areas should be limited.

An important non-protective factor in counter design is that they should permit levels of privacy appropriate to the nature of the business transacted at them. Post office counters, for example, have no need for privacy but employment offices do and their counters should be designed with that need in mind.

The question of violence is likely to have a number of significant implications for the training of staff and the design of offices.

(Adapted from *Aggressive Behaviour by Claimants*, courtesy The Tavistock Institute of Human Relations).

Interview rooms

Interviews involving privacy, complexity and unusual length, are best undertaken in interview rooms. Interview rooms should be well suited to the conduct of business while at the same time providing reasonable levels of protection to interviewing officers and privacy to clients.

Interview room design should incorporate the following features:

- be fitted with two doors opposite each other. One door to lead in from the public area and the other from the staff area;
- be provided with a single desk or other, perhaps, an attractive table;
- be provided with chairs on each side of the desk;
- ideally, desk/table to be fixed to the floor;
- no other movable fittings to be provided with the exception of non-dangerous decorations;
- door leading into staff area to be fitted with a one-way viewing panel of laminated glass (minimum 7.5 mm thickness);
- be provided with duress alarm button discreetly fitted on the interviewing officer's side of a desk and capable of being activated without alerting a client;
- sound control should be such that raised voices are detectable by other staff;
- be provided with a telephone;
- doors to be fitted so that: door providing access from public area to open inward, and door providing access from staff area to open outward;
- door on public side to be fitted with a Lockwood 572 (DL) escape latch 505RH or 555LH or equivalent, with a lever handle only on inside;
- door permitting access from the staff side to be fitted with a Lockwood 572-512DL (RH) or 572-562 (LH) or equivalent;
- privacy bolts and turn knobs NOT to be fitted on door permitting access from staff area; and
- door permitting access from public area to be fitted with a door closing device.

Interview rooms in offices lacking staff conference facilities are sometimes provided with folding partitions and movable furniture in order that areas devoted to interview rooms can be converted to other purposes when the need arises. Managers need to consider such competing needs not only from the perspective of noise insulation but in terms of security considerations, including the possibility of gaining entry from one interview room to another through folding partitions. It is strongly recommended security not be sacrificed for flexibility in

those offices in which client aggression to staff has been identified as a problem.

Entrances

Entrances to offices providing public services can shape client expectations and attitudes positively. In short, the more helpful an entrance is with regard to client needs the less will be the probability of client aggression. Entrances may be at street level or they may be within a building, at any level. The following points should be borne in mind when designing office entrances:

- entrances should be accessible to all categories of clients—including the blind and those confined to wheel chairs—well signposted internally and externally, and indicate agency functions;
- initial reception point/desk/counter to be located there;
- initial reception point/desk/counter to be well lit, tidy and efficient-appearing;
- elevators to be clean and well serviced;
- doors capable of being opened easily, preferably electronically, to permit access to cripples, children and elderly;
- glare and direct sunlight to be shielded;
- public contact hours to be prominently displayed and capable of being read from the street if at all possible;
- initial reception point/desk/counter to be no more than ten metres from a point of entry;
- public and internal telephones to be provided; and
- recorded messages or telephone interpreter service to be provided where indicated by numbers of foreign speaking clients as well as sufficient supply of explanatory pamphlets in appropriate languages.

Alarms

In institutions subjected to armed robberies, such as banks, the installation of hold-up alarms which are centrally monitored by a commercial security company is standard procedure. The use of duress alarms in public contact areas where the threat is that of client aggression, is not as prevalent.

Counter officers gain confidence from the fact that in the event of a serious problem arising an alarm can be quickly and discreetly sounded.

Duress alarms for use in public contact areas and interview rooms The use of duress alarms is recommended in organisations in which the risk of client aggression exists. Duress alarms vary in sophistication depending on the size of the organisation, the number and location of public contact areas, capacity to provide immediate local response and so on. Thus, any system considered must be carefully planned to ensure it precisely matches needs and resources.

A duress alarm consists of alarm buttons discreetly located at officers' work stations which are wired to an alarm panel which indicates the activation source. Depending on needs, alarm panels can be designed to raise local visual and/or audible alarm on activation, relate the alarm to a commercial security company or both.

Where local response can be provided, it is usual to place the alarm panel in an adjacent staff occupied area or guard post, from which point action can follow immediately.

Duress alarms which are designed primarily to ensure a local response, are provided with a time delay so that if the local alarm is not cancelled within a fixed period, for example, 60 seconds, the signal is routed directly to a commercial security company from where predetermined responses will be initiated. In small offices, in which local support would not normally be available, the alarm signal would proceed directly to the central monitoring company.

To ensure total reliability, duress alarm systems must be well maintained and regularly tested. In addition, their design should incorporate a fault alarm.

Duress alarms need to be supported by well designed and documented procedures covering activation and response. These procedures must be understood by all staff and periodically practised.

Duress alarm features Duress alarm systems should incorporate the following features as appropriate:

- alarms should be sited close to the interview stations to which they are connected so as to ensure speedy staff responses;

- staff should always be in the vicinity of duress alarms so as to ensure they are responded to when activated; and
- mimic (additional) panels may be sited elsewhere in a building but immediate action must be predicated on a response from nearby colleagues.

Routing of clients

The factors most influential in reducing client aggression are speedy service and efficient service. Speedy service is dependent upon a number of elements, including the routing of clients from the time they enter a public contact area until they meet an interviewing officer. Competent routing avoids unnecessary waste of clients' time and, importantly, prevents clients being dealt with out of turn. Primary aspects of client routing include: signage, document drops, reception/inquiry, staff rotation, client flow, queuing, calling forward, appointments, and regulated entry.

Signage All public contact areas need to be well signposted in languages suited to the locale. Signage should include matters such as exits, toilets, interview stations, inquiry stations, hours of opening and client flow arrangements. Signs should be carefully considered from a client perspective and be well constructed. Discarded computer printout embellished with textracolour messages does not inspire client confidence.

The international symbol "i" should be displayed adjacent to reception/information points. In offices in which client flow is uneven, it is helpful to display a sign at the entrance advising attendance during off-peak hours.

Document drops Public offices should provide document drop devices near public entrances when appropriate. There are few things more aggravating than having to queue merely in order to lodge a document. Design of secure document receptacles is a simple matter. But, due consideration needs to be given to security of such receptacles, especially if they are likely to include cheques or money. If there is reason to suspect explosive devices might be placed in them, their use is clearly contraindicated in the absence of appropriate bomb detection technology.

Reception Provision of a reception or inquiry point capable of dealing with general inquiries is a most useful means of reducing unnecessary waiting time. For example, in some Medicare offices it is necessary to queue in order to find out which claim form one should complete. Clients then need to complete the required form before lining up again for service. Such an experience is extremely irritating to clients pressed for time as well as being unnecessary. Local conditions determine the desirability of reception/inquiry points. But, in busy offices with constant queuing they are essential.

In offices having more than one set of public contact counters, it will normally be useful to have a receptionist(s) located on the ground floor close to the entrance (or points of entry). Ideally, persons staffing such points will be capable of providing answers to simple queries as well as directions to particular public contact areas. Such staff need to be carefully selected, trained and rotated. Each station needs to have its function clearly labelled.

Staff rotation Rotation of staff has two principal uses. Firstly, some areas of interviewing are extremely taxing and employees require periodic breaks. Thus, in offices in which stress is associated with the interviewing function, staff should be rotated between interviewing and other non-public contact tasks. This form of rotation is easily arranged in large offices but poses problems in small offices.

Secondly, staff can be rotated between duties so as to match client flow. Thus, at those times of the day when client demand is highest the greatest number of employees should be deployed to cope with demand. Too often long queues form in public offices, such as banks and post offices, at lunch times—a time when as many as 50 per cent of public contact officers are off duty. It is apparent many public offices do not vary their counter and interviewing officer numbers over the course of a day or a week so as to match client demand. Long lines form at times of maximum client demand as a result. Long queues mean long waits, leading to irritated and possibly aggressive clients.

Careful consideration needs to be paid by architects to the movements of staff between rear areas and counter and interviewing duties. Sufficient work stations must be provided in both areas.

Completing documents In the absence of compelling reasons to the contrary, forms should be completed by clients prior to approaching reception/counter staff. Where forms are complex or there is a multiplicity of forms, provision should be made for answering related inquiries and rapid accuracy checking.

Sufficient places should be available at form filling stations to cater for peak periods and supplies should be checked throughout the day to ensure their adequacy. Pens, too, should be checked as they are both stolen and damaged by clients in addition to running out of ink. Deficiencies in providing such materials can generate considerable irritation among time-anxious clients.

Client flow There are four principal means of controlling client flow: lines, numbering clients on arrival, appointments, and controlled entry. With the exception of appointments (provided they are kept on time) these options all involve client waiting. Waiting reduces a client's tolerance in respect of other shortcomings as well as inducing irritation in its own right (*see* O'Keefe 1989). Thus, managers should make every effort to ensure client waiting times are kept within clients' tolerance range.

An additional flow refinement that can be exercised, depending on the nature of business transacted, is to stream clients, so that as each client presents for service, administrative details are quickly attended to. Forms are personally completed at desks or similar structures and are then checked for completion, signatures are appended and so on. The client is then passed on to another officer who attends to the substance of their business, whether it be the issue of a passport or advice concerning a wayward child. This approach is particularly useful in agencies providing multiple services. The client flow involved is shown at Figure 2. Short inquiries can, if deemed desirable, be dealt with by a receptionist, and such clients saved a long wait. Clients requiring more substantial service can be referred by receptionists to either counter or interviewing officers as necessary (see Figure 3). There is no single client flow that is best suited to all circumstances. Managers and planners should give careful thought to tailoring client flow systems best suited to their particular needs and resources.

Line forming, queuing Most queuing systems require clients to join a line upon arrival at an office or other public contact area
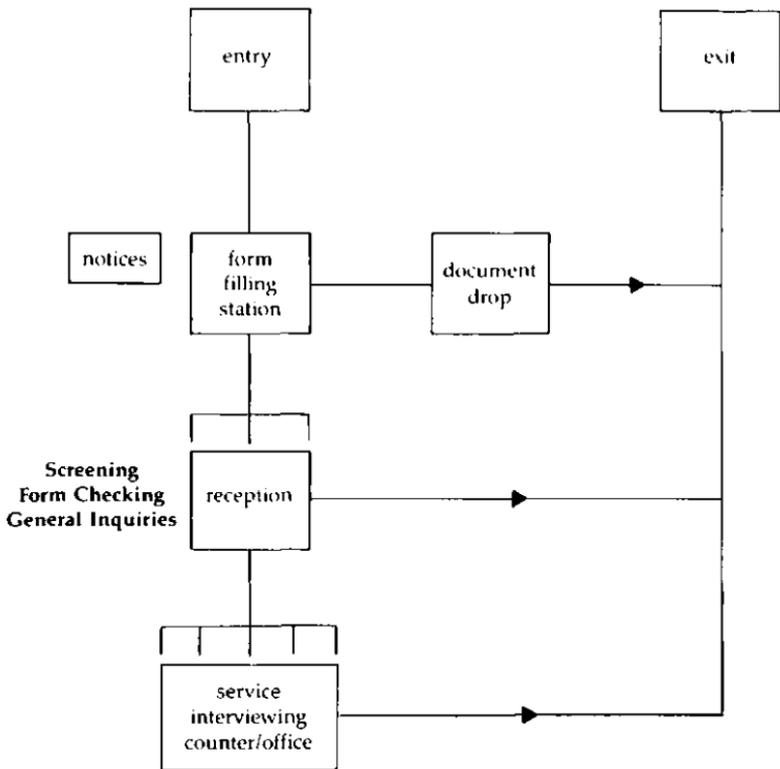
Figure 2: *Client streaming—single service*

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        ┌──────────┐                              ┌──────────┐
        │  entry   │                              │   exit   │
        └────┬─────┘                              └────┬─────┘
             │                                         │
             │                                         │
┌────────┐  ┌┴─────────┐   ┌──────────┐                │
│ notices│  │  form    │   │ document │                │
│        │  │ filling  ├───┤  drop    ├──────▶         │
│        │  │ station  │   │          │                │
└────────┘  └────┬─────┘   └──────────┘                │
                 │                                      │
                 │                                      │
              ┌──┴───┐                                  │
Screening     │      │                                  │
Form Checking │reception├──────────────────▶            │
General Inquiries │  │                                  │
              └──┬───┘                                  │
                 │                                      │
        ┌────────┴────────┐  ┌──────────────┐  ┌──────────────┐
        │  Service A      │  │  Service B   │  │  Service C   │
        │ Interviewing   ▶│  │ Interviewing▶│  │ Interviewing │
        │ counter/office  │  │ counter/office│ │ counter/office│
        └─────────────────┘  └──────────────┘  └──────────────┘
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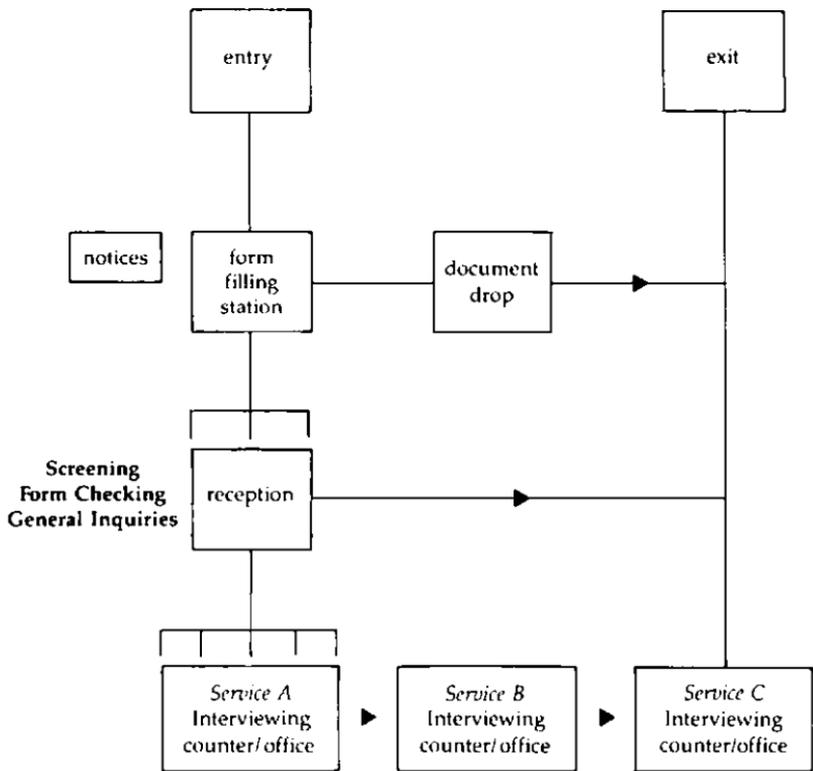**Figure 3**: *Client streaming—multiple service*

and then work their way forward until they reach the counter and interviewing officer servicing their particular queue. The process requires least management but it does possess drawbacks. Clients arriving later than oneself and joining a different queue always have the good fortune to join a faster moving queue and are invariably attended to ahead of oneself. This experience is intensely irritating to certain personality types and can result in aggression among clients as well as between client and, once he reaches the head of a queue, interviewing officer. The tragedy is that if one changes one's queue, then the queue one was in first off then moves faster. Pushy types who attempt to counter this phenomenon by switching to and fro between lines are liable to wreck the system entirely. This drawback can be avoided by arranging a single line which stops well short of a counter. As each interviewing officer becomes free they then signal the client at the head of the queue forward either orally or by means of an illuminated sign or chime.

The second drawback is that lengthy queuing is not well suited to invalids, the elderly, the pregnant and amputees. Disadvantaged clients distressed at having to wait in a queue are unlikely to be in a positive frame of mind by the time they reach an interviewing officer.

Queue jumping, that is clients pushing either into lines or even going straight away to the head of a line without waiting, is a form of behaviour that may produce aggression. Research evidence suggests frustration and aggression occurring in a client subjected to another's queue jumping behaviour is likely to vary according to how close to the head of a queue the client is. The closer to the front of the line, the greater the frustration and aggression generally experienced (Ahmed 1982, Milgram et al. 1986). This finding possesses obvious implications for counter and interviewing officers.

Queue lanes should be marked by means of either heavy duty tape affixed to the floor or by cords attached to stands. Supporting signage should be utilised in either case. Cords and stands are more flexible in that they can be easily moved to suit varying configurations and placed sufficiently high to avoid the possibility of short-sighted persons tripping over them. On the other hand, all systems which impede intrusion into lines by the impatient and so reinforce normative behaviour warrant consid-

eration as ushers/guards are rarely available these days to perform such a function.

Calling clients forward A common alternative to standing in line is that of providing each client with a numbered ticket on arrival. Clients then wait on (hopefully) clean and comfortable seats until their number is called over a public address system or illuminated on a digital screen. This procedure is also a form of queuing (Milgram et al. 1986). Some enterprises are clearly better suited to line forming than calling clients forward by number and the reverse is true of others. However, there are situations in which clear selection criteria are not always evident. Managers in doubt are best advised to opt for a calling forward system.

Appointments Formal appointments are better suited to some forms of interviewing, such as legal aid or public trustee matters, than others. The system can be useful but sometimes inflexible, particularly if a client does not appear and there is no one else to interview during that time slot. Interviewing time is then wasted. On the other hand, as everyone who has ever attended a medical practitioner or dentist knows, there is often a tendency to extend appointments. Thus, interviewing officers often fail to keep their appointments on time. There are few things more infuriating to a client pressed for time and who presents for an appointment on time to be kept waiting. In view of this, when appointments are utilised, care should be taken to ensure scheduling is realistic.

Having to reassign interviewing officers at the last moment may be another irritant associated with the appointment method. Clients who have an expectation they will be dealing with a particular interviewing officer by appointment, especially when that officer has a knowledge of their case, are unlikely to be impressed by any reassignment.

Many agencies using an interview by appointment system deal continually with a stressed clientele, for example, Family Court counselling or desk tax auditing. Under such conditions it is important waiting clients be transferred to their interview room as smoothly as possible. A professional, businesslike, approach is desirable. A receptionist might say, "Good afternoon Mr . . ., the auditor, Ms . . ., is expecting you. I'll let her know you are here. Please take a seat and she'll be with you in a few moments".
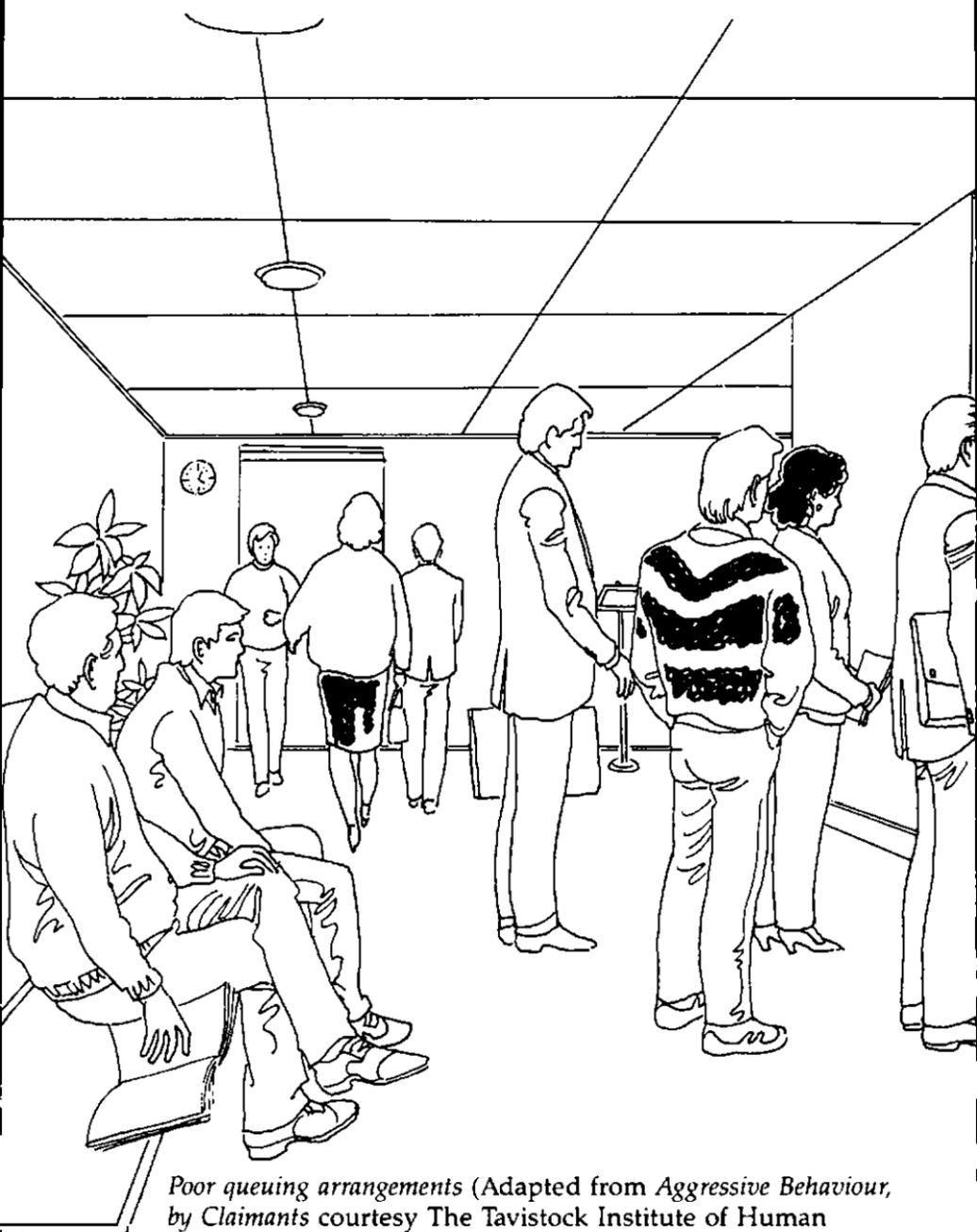
Poor queuing arrangements (Adapted from *Aggressive Behaviour, by Claimants* courtesy The Tavistock Institute of Human Relations).

Regulated entry Most thinking regarding problems associated with client flow is predicated on the assumption that the number of clients in a waiting room or other public contact area will be limited only by the available space. However, if a particular service/industry or location is subject to serious problems of security then an alternative approach may be necessary. Reasons for limiting the number of clients in an office at any one time mostly revolve around issues of client behaviour although fear of holdups in agencies carrying cash may also apply.

If, for whatever reason, it is determined entry should be limited it then becomes necessary for clients to wait outside the office, whether that be a street, concourse, mall or even another part of the same building. Placed in such a position intending clients will normally queue, but not always, and thus the potential for irritation can be heightened considerably. Under such a restricted access regimen, a single client (or family group) is admitted through the public entrance by a guard on a "one out one in" basis or, conversely when the guard is advised to admit a client by a waiting. interviewing officer. This system is not unusual in Europe, where businesses are fearful of having crowds on their premises that might become targets for terrorists' bombs quite apart from robbery reduction considerations. The method can also be useful in offices in which groups of client (and even non-client) youths, for instance, congregate and misbehave. Although the system possesses distinct disadvantages there may be occasions when its advantages will outweigh its disadvantages.

Personal contact

Eventually, client and counter or interviewing officer come into personal contact; each bringing to the interaction their respective antecedent experiences. It is at this stage the professionalism of interviewing officers should be employed to maintain control of interactions so as to ensure pleasant and productive meetings.

The degree of pleasantness and productiveness achievable in any particular interaction is, of course, strongly influenced by the popularity of the policies and services provided by particular agencies and, the degree of anxiety experienced by clients. Trainers and managers need to take such factors into account when inducting interviewing officers.

Strategies for dealing with clients fall into two basic categories: product/service knowledge, and interpersonal skills. These two strategies are collectively known as customer service. The former are largely agency specific depending on the services provided, whether they be financial institutions, airlines or welfare offices. The latter are mostly universal although a few are specific to particular industries.

Product/service knowledge

The level of service provided to clients by interviewing officers reflects in part the knowledge those officers possess concerning agency products and procedures. It cannot be stressed too strongly that all interviewing officers must be adequately trained in this regard. Degrees of training vary according to industry/ service. Some industries, such as the financial industry, take such needs seriously whereas others do not. One study undertaken on behalf of the National Training Council (1988) suggests government agencies are largely deficient in this regard, partly due to the fact they are often engaged in non-competitive services.

It is essential all interviewing officers are adequately trained to provide sound service to clients. This requirement is discussed on page 8, "Training".

Interpersonal skills

Oddly, the same National Training Council study showed that virtually no interviewing staff were selected on the basis of their interpersonal skills. Nine core interpersonal skills are said to apply to virtually every interviewer. These are:
- presentation;
- courtesy/politeness;
- perceiving client requirements (listening);
- clear expression;
- efficiency/promptness;
- willingness/helpfulness;
- friendliness/warmth;
- projecting congruent non-verbal cues; and
- satisfying client while maintaining loyalty to organisation.

Situation specific skills In addition to these core skills, a range of desirable situation specific skills or attributes was also identified, including:
- individualising (flexibility to different clients);
- sensitivity;
- discretion/tact/unobtrusiveness;
- handling difficult clients;
- handling complaints;
- superior oral communication;
- tolerance to pressure/resilience;
- understanding and handling cross-cultural differences and needs;
- questioning techniques;
- presenting the organisation; and
- establishing rapport/depth.

The list is not exhaustive and supervisors and trainers may well be able to identify others within their specific areas.

A further need identified in relation to interviewing/personal contact skills, is the necessity of service workers to possess

current knowledge of products/services. In some government offices in particular, in which policies, procedures and program content constantly change, staff often are unable to advise clients effectively. In addition to irritating clients, lack of necessary knowledge reduces clients' respect for the organisation as a whole. Managers of officers experiencing such difficulties need to work hard at keeping their officers totally up-to-date (*see* O'Keefe 1989).

Non-verbal cues are important in all human interactions. About 75 per cent of non-verbal cues or message sending is done with the head, mostly facial muscles. A smile conveys warmth and sincerity: a frown communicates disinterest and coldness. Non-verbal cues expressed by interviewing officers should be consistent with their utterances as well as encourage a positive relationship with clients. Lists of positive and negative non-verbal skills are shown at Figure 4. The lists illustrate some of the more critical cues that can be transmitted in interviewing officer-client interactions.

Hints for interviewing officers

Ideally counter and interviewing officers are instructed by their respective agencies in the basic "do's" and "don'ts" of client interactions. The following lists of the more obvious points selected from a range of customer service courses are of interest to trainers.

DO

- Greet clients by name (when known);
- Be polite, always say "please" and "thank you";
- Smile;
- Treat each client as an individual;
- Listen;
- Ask questions to remove ambiguities and obtain facts;
- Act expeditiously;
- Gain client's confidence;
- Be helpful;
- Be tactful;
- Remain neutral;

Figure 4 *Non-Verbal cues*

	positive	negative
1.	Keeping a respectable professional distance from client	Positioning too close/far conveys intrusion or unavailability/inattentiveness
2.	Turning side on to a client encourages joint problem solving, cooperation, helpfulness	Facing a client square on can convey aggression/confrontation. Physically turning away conveys avoidance, preoccupation with another task, inattentiveness
3.	Maintaining good eye contact is non-threatening yet attentive (strong/solid)	Maintaining poor eye contact, failing to look levelly at client, glaring, brief or sharp glances, convey disinterest, shiftiness, hostility
4.	Smiling genuinely, conveys real feelings	Artificial smiling disguises real feelings
5.	Complementing/mirroring a client's movements, leaning forward and backward appropriately	Overzealous gestures patronise and denigrate a client's intelligence (especially with females and minority groups)
6.	Lifting head attentively, shoulders back and nodding, conveys positive, confident, alert appearance	Shrugging and headshaking convey disinterest and apathy
7.	Open palm gestures and raised eyebrows convey attentiveness, interest and welcome to client	Sneering, pouting, tapping fingers, looking at watch, short, harsh, pointing, movements convey impatience and make clients feel they are intruding, interfering or, are a nuisance.

Source: National Training Council 1988, *Interpersonal Skills as a Critical Component in Customer Service*, AGPS, Canberra.

- Maintain eye contact;
- Be firm;
- Be decisive; and
- Obtain advice from supervisors when you do not know an answer.

DON'T
- Lose temper;
- Lose patience;
- Lose professional perspective;
- Forget you represent your agency;
- Keep clients waiting;
- Interview clients out of turn;
- Allow clients to be passed from one officer to another;
- Guess answers to clients' questions.

Nature of client aggression

Aggression is behaviour manifested by a client toward a counter and interviewing officer that physically injures an officer, causes an officer to fear for personal safety and/or imposes unacceptable levels of stress upon an officer.

Client aggression may be manifested in any of the following forms or combinations thereof:
- loud, hectoring voice and manner;
- swearing and other objectionable oral behaviour such as rude noises;
- questioning an officer's competence;
- threatening to complain to an officer's supervisor;
- threatening physical harm;
- physical assault, ranging from spitting to stabbing;
- damaging property; and
- sexual harassment.

Aggressors' motivations

Aggressors' motivations range from intense to mild and from rational to irrational. Some aggressive clients may be desperate for money, shelter or food. Others might be outraged at having to wait for half an hour for no apparent reason. Drunken clients,

neurotic and psychotic clients are all capable of random aggression. On the other hand, some calculating clients shrewdly employ aggression in order to hasten service or intimidate an interviewing officer. In short, motivations of aggressors vary greatly, including:

- altered states of consciousness; neurotics, psychotics, drunks and other drug abusers;
- high anxiety with regard to personal affairs and welfare;
- irritation arising from cultural differences;
- irritation arising from officers' manner and associated factors; and
- irritation arising from environment and client control systems obtaining in the public contact area generally.

Cues to impending aggression

Interviews may either get off to a bad start or, conversely, start well and then deteriorate. In the former instance an interviewing officer has to initiate salvage strategies straight away. In the latter case, sensitivity to cues of rising irritation and impending aggression is a great advantage. The earlier cues are detected the sooner an employee can attempt to retrieve a situation.

Competent interviewers improve their skills with experience. Unfortunately, the trend in large agencies appears to be one of rapid turnover and rotation. Thus, many counter staff do not have the time to build up a large repertoire of interpersonal skills over time.

Cues of rising irritation are usually manifested in a client's behaviour and appearance. They include:

- flushing of face and neck, sometimes including protruding and pulsing blood vessels in forehead, temples and neck;
- rising voice;
- grimacing, frowning;
- grinding teeth and clenching of jaw muscles;
- flaring of nostrils;
- increasing excitability and gesticulation;
- rapid, shallow breathing;
- sweating on forehead, hairline;
- trembling of limbs;

Interviewing officer and client arguing during interview

- increasing coarseness of language;
- pounding table or counter with hand; and
- standing up in the course of a seated interview, including pacing to and fro.

These various cues should be interpreted in context as individually each could be an indication of a medical condition, ranging from piles to Parkinson's disease. Nevertheless, sensitive and aware public contact staff will note such cues, consider their significance and, if appropriate, act to reduce their client's irritation.

Conduct of interviews

Interviewing officers are responsible for conducting professional and productive interviews. They should make full use of the interviewing and other customer service skills taught them during induction and in-service training, as well as adhering to prescribed procedures.

It is particularly important interviewing officers do not exceed their limits of competence, including knowledge. Answers should not be guessed; supervisors should be consulted without hesitation. Staff should be encouraged to seek advice but not excessively.

Fast, considerate, professional and courteous treatment of a client coupled with acute observation of the client's demeanour are normally sufficient to ensure a productive interview. Interviews that involve the conveying of adverse decisions to clients are best conducted in interview rooms rather than at counters. The motivation for an aggrieved client to "play to the gallery" is avoided in such circumstances. Ideally, persons making adverse decisions should be the ones who convey them to the clients.

Interviewing officers should set clients at ease as soon as possible in the course of an interview. Client reactions to initial impressions are sometimes sufficient to shape the tenor of a routine interview. Thus, a relaxed and cooperative taxpayer will interpret much that follows, for example, decor of interview room, in positive terms. Commonly, a client faced with a hostile or cold interviewing officer will tend to interpret things negatively and an interviewing room will assume the proportions of an interrogation chamber.

Standardised training in people skills, interview techniques and public relations are highly desirable for interviewing officers engaged in stressful interviews.

Managers should not assume in their planning and administration that ethnic based tensions will be one way only, that is, a Caucasian counter or interviewing officer interacting with an ethnic client. Often in government agencies the situation is reversed nowadays, with a Caucasian/Anglo-Saxon client being interviewed by an officer of ethnic origin, that is, non-Caucasian. On occasion, both parties may be ethnics and tension can occur based on ethnic discord.

Responding to emotional clients

On occasion, counter and interviewing officers will encounter emotional clients, such as the angry and the grief stricken. If symptoms of a client's emotional state are clearly apparent, counter and interviewing officers should acknowledge rather than ignore the fact.

To ignore a client's emotional state may increase its intensity, whereas recognition, such as "you seem to feel . . .", is sometimes sufficient to retrieve a situation. Officers must ensure they do not get themselves involved in the emotion. Where extreme emotion is the product of an agency's shortcomings, such as the non-arrival of a welfare cheque on time, officers should acknowledge the error and remedy it in a positive manner.

General advice offered by the Federal Department of Social Services to officers faced with emotional clients who have not yet reached a stage where an interview requires aborting include:

- maintain a professional attitude;
- do not share a client's emotion;
- keep calm and speak in a soft tone;
- use body language to indicate concern and intent; and
- listen carefully.

Terminating client contact

Public contact officers occasionally encounter clients who mani-
fest aggression as defined in this book, and agency procedures
prescribe the appropriate action to be taken by officers. Those
procedures are partly universal and partly determined by local
circumstances. Advice offered here cannot take into account
unique circumstances and thus constitutes only a general guide
to staff protection.

Declining to commence an interview

When a client presents for an interview in an unacceptably
aggressive mood, for example, argumentatively drunk or appar-
ently in a psychotic condition, it is unwise to proceed with an
interview. A counter or interviewing officer should refer such a
matter to the supervisor for decision. Decisions not to com-
mence interviews should be the subject of an incident report.
Such clients should be asked to leave the premises. In the event
of their refusing to leave, they should either be accompanied to
the exit by a security guard (provided one is employed and
policy permits) or police called.

Terminating ongoing interview

Interviewing officers occasionally find themselves getting out of
their depth in the course of complex interviews. Rather than
bluffing and guessing and thereby risking irritating clients (quite
apart from the poor service that must result) interviewing offi-
cers should call on an experienced colleague or a supervisor for
assistance. Supervisors should ensure interviewing officers feel
free to call on such assistance rather than soldiering on so as not
to risk being thought incompetent.

In situations in which interviewing officers find the climate of
an interview reducing for no apparent reason, they may find it
necessary to caution their client. If no improvement is achieved,

interviewing officers might then find it necessary to consult their supervisor with a view to terminating an interview. It might even be necessary to advise a client that police will be called if they persist with their aggression. Supervisors will exercise their judgment whether to terminate an interview immediately or persevere. It is sometimes found that an additional person, such as a supervisor, participating in a stressful interview will have a calming effect on aggressive clients. All interviews terminated by a supervisor should be the subject of an incident report.

Interviewing officers are sometimes faced with clients who refuse to exit an interview even though all information has been provided to them and nothing constructive remains to be done. In such cases, a supervisor should be summoned, the situation further explained to the client and, if appropriate, the supervisor should inform the client that the interview is terminated. See page 53, "Directing clients to leave premises", should a client still refuse to leave.

Should a stage be reached at which interviewing officers fear for their safety or are physically or orally abused, they should activate their duress alarm, promptly remove themselves from the client and seek assistance. Police should be called if the aggression inflicted by a client is thought to amount to an offence. All interviews terminated in this manner should be the subject of an incident report.

Care should be taken in respect of clients manifesting severe neurotic or psychotic symptoms during the course of an interview. Of course, an interview should not be started if such symptoms are apparent prior to commencement. Extra patience will be necessary. Sometimes there will be a staff member with the ability to manage particular clients. Police, and possibly paramedic attendance will be necessary in most cases of violence. Employees should not normally use physical force other than to defend themselves.

Counter and interviewing officers should be extremely careful not to give needless offence to clients and thereby provide fuel for their aggression. Regrettably, such is sometimes the case. Supervisors called to intervene in counter and interviewing officer-client interactions need to be aware of such a possibility. Should an employee or, office procedures or fixtures, be established as the reasonable cause of a client's wrath, suitable apologies must be made to the client. Considerable diplomacy may be

necessary in such cases as it is undesirable to destroy an employ-ee's confidence however much remedial counselling or training which may subsequently be required. Thought should also be paid to possible deficiencies of management in failing to ensure proper training, selection, planning and so on.

Decisions to request police attendance should be guided by office/agency procedures. Discretion to call police may be dele-gated to individual officers, security officers, supervisors, office managers, regional managers or the senior person present at the time of an incident.

Mutual support

There is need for mutual support to be exercised among public contact officers. Thus, interviewing officers working at a counter should keep a peripheral eye on their adjacent colleagues. Should one appear to be getting into difficulty with a client, assistance should be offered. Assistance can be offered by either walking up to the officer in question and offering help or advis-ing that the officer is required to take a telephone call elsewhere in the building. Once an officer is away from his interviewing station he can be offered advice.

Alternatively, the officer in trouble can be telephoned and asked if assistance is needed. Normally, the question will be phrased in such a way that it requires only a "yes" or "no" response. Often personal intrusion is the preferred option as the mere physical presence of another is often sufficient to cool a heated interaction. Of course, should an officer who is in the process of an interview decide to assist a colleague in such a way, proper provision needs to be made for the officer's own client.

Interviews conducted in interview rooms are less susceptible to view by colleagues. Thus, it is a sound practice for staff, whether or not they be interviewing officers, to glance through the obser-vation window of occupied interview rooms when passing by.

Supervisors must be careful that interviewing officers con-ducting interviews that extend past office closing hours are not left without support. Interviewing officers, who, during the course of an interview, form the opinion it is likely to go past closing time should alert their supervisor by the telephone that should be positioned in every interviewing station. Interviews

conducted in interviewing rooms are those most likely to be forgotten should they go over time. Ideally, all interviewing rooms should have an "occupied" sign by staff entrances. The signs should be on the outside so that passers by are aware that an interview is in process.

Action on activation of duress alarms

As explained previously, duress alarms provide visual and audible signals at an alarm panel situated at a nearby location, normally one that is constantly staffed. Alarm panels also indicate the source of an alarm. Staff should be trained to respond promptly to such alarms in pairs, whether or not a supervisor is present.

In situations in which a number of interview rooms are adjacent it is helpful if lights, capable of being activated by duress alarm switches, are affixed to each room. Thus, staff arriving in response to an alarm can easily identify the room in which assistance is required.

On arrival at the point of origin of an alarm, responding officers should assess the situation and, if a supervisor is present, comply with his or her directions. If no supervisor is present, officers should act on their own initiative.

Ideally, alarms should be activated before significant aggression occurs so that responding officers are not presented with a serious situation. Such is not always the case, of course, although it should be emphasised that the number of duress alarm activations in relation to the total number of interviews conducted around the country is extremely small.

However, taking a worst case scenario, responding officers should be prepared, without endangering themselves, to:

- ensure safety of activating officer;
- render first aid;
- summon police/ambulance;
- await arrival of police/ambulance;
- collect names and addresses of witnesses; and
- submit incident report.

A list of such immediate actions should be posted next to each alarm panel.

Directing clients to leave premises

When a client's behaviour is unacceptably aggressive, the client should be asked to leave. As a general rule, force should not be used to effect this aim. In the event of a client, or other person on the premises, refusing to depart when directed to do so, police should be called to remove the person.

Procedures prescribed in individual offices determine how such events are handled. As a general rule, however, the most senior person present or some other person exercising a delegated authority, such as a security officer, should handle the problem.

Local police are sometimes unsure of their power to remove persons from Federal Government property or property leased by the Federal Government. Section 12 (2)(c) *Public Order (Protection of Persons and Property) Act 1971* empowers local police officers to direct persons to quit Commonwealth property.

Post incident administration

Most instances of client aggression inflicted on interviewing officers and counter staff are not serious—raised voices, insults, perhaps a finger prodded in a chest or a push. In a small number of cases, though, serious assaults are committed. Post event administration is a necessity in all cases but is understandably more extensive in serious cases. Critical incident debriefing is recommended in all but the most trivial cases (Mitchell 1986).

Victims of client aggression

Victims of client aggression are affected in different ways. Some bank tellers are permanently traumatised by a holdup whereas others are very little affected. Nevertheless, a responsibility rests on management to ensure all reasonably possible is done to minimise post event trauma. In minor cases, a short break from counter duties will often be sufficient for counter and interviewing officers to collect themselves to the extent they can resume duty. More seriously victimised officers may wish to be removed from public contact entirely. Others will wish to be relieved temporarily but remain within the social network of their normal work group although with a different role.

In the event of hospitalisation, visits should be arranged, and possibly a television set provided in the ward. Some institutions send their traumatised staff flowers or a box of chocolates. Such gestures can be greatly appreciated at times of emotional distress.

Counselling

Counselling may be required. Some large institutions employ in-house counsellors who undertake the task whereas others contract with local professionals. A number of enterprising institutions have made videotapes touching on client inflicted

aggression and which provide an explanation of post event trauma. Copies are made available to victimised employees so that their family members can view them and so better understand the emotional problems of their relative. Post incident stress is a well recognised and sometimes serious problem.

Those organisations lacking their own health support facilities and in which customer aggression can be a problem, might consider paying a retainer to professional counsellors located close to their places of business to undertake staff post incident trauma counselling on a needs basis.

Security/staff committees

Managers of larger offices possessing a public contact function are well advised to constitute security/staff committees. Such committees will include staff representatives, management representatives, security officers (if employed) and, depending on circumstances, a representative of the building's managers. Recent emphasis on occupational health and safety has led to the creation of occupational health and safety committees in many organisations. Some organisations might consider assigning security committee responsibilities to occupational health and safety committees.

Security committees should operate proactively to the best extent possible. All recorded events of client aggression should be reported to security/staff committees and duly considered. Alterations to procedures, mechanisms and policies may flow on as a result. Certainly, care should be taken to ensure that whatever lessons can be learned from instances of aggression are in fact learned.

The sorts of issues that are usefully dealt with at security/staff committee meetings include:

- counter or reception manning levels;
- identification of habitual aggressors;
- continuing training;
- responsibility for conveying unfavourable decisions to clients;
- improving cooperation between counter and back office staff (where there are distinctions); and
- refining procedures relating to support of counter and interviewing officers in trouble.

Incident reports

It is essential that all incidents of aggression be reported. Employees typically report only those incidents of a more serious nature. Managers and analysts require reports on all incidents if sound protective strategies are to be maintained. Managers should encourage comprehensive submission, and make it clear to staff that negative judgments will not be made of officers who in fact submit such reports. It has been found in some agencies that counter and interviewing officers are loath to submit incident reports for fear of being viewed by supervisors as lacking competence in client relations.

In large organisations possessing central security elements, copies of all incident reports should be forwarded for trend analysis and other appropriate action.

Banning clients and deterring aggression

The banning of clients possessing a record of aggression toward employees is the final step in the process of staff protection. Voluntary and private agencies/offices are not normally obliged to serve those with whom they do not wish to deal (there are certain statutory exceptions).

A direction to leave the premises will be sufficient to induce most such persons to depart. If such a request by a legally competent person is ignored, police should be requested to remove the now erstwhile client who has become a trespasser. A security guard can be used for the purpose, at the direction of a legally competent person. As a general rule, though, it is better to utilise police services as the use of a guard increases the potential for litigation.

Injunctions prohibiting entry to an agency/office by specified persons can be used to prevent subsequent visits by undesirable clients. In such cases it is necessary to show nominated parties have a track record of actual or threatened violence or other misconduct in respect of particular premises. Legal advice should be sought in respect of such an option. Injunctions of whatever type are rarely effective instruments. Managers of government offices should consult with their departments' legal branches and security sections regarding the appropriateness of seeking injunctions in particular cases.

Managers of offices subjected to the attentions of aggressive clients possess options short of outright banning. The point is especially important in those agencies, usually government, exercising a monopoly of the service in question. Options open to managers include:

- asking problem clients to attend their office. At such meetings clients will be warned as to the nature of their conduct and possible consequences thereof. The opportunity should also be taken to address any problems the client might have with the agency and which may cause aggression;
- sending a registered letter to problem clients, outlining the nature of their unacceptable behaviour; and
- in cases in which serious aggression is expected (but has not occurred) police can be requested to be in attendance, perhaps in a nearby office, so that prompt action can be taken in the event of violence occurring. As a general rule, known difficult clients should be interviewed by two officers.

Charging offenders and compensation

Police will normally lay charges against client aggressors where an offence is evidenced. However, that does not always happen and victims may themselves institute civil and/or criminal actions should they so wish. Claims for criminal injuries compensation may also be considered. Both supervisors and victims need to consider workers' compensation claims carefully in the light of the laws applying within their respective polities, and their respective situations.

In respect of offences committed personally against employees, those employees will be the complainant in respect of any charges laid and will liaise directly with police.

Research

Agencies employing numbers of counter and other in-house interviewing officers, especially at more than one location, are well advised to assess the extent to which such employees are victimised by aggressive clients. The more acute managements' understanding of the phenomenon is, the more sensitive planning, design and procedures will be. The entire process of client aggression measurement and prevention is best undertaken by

means of a clearly developed system. One simple seven step process recommended by London's Tavistock Institute of Human Relations is:

- identifying the problem;
- initiating data collection;
- describing the problem;
- searching for preventive measures;
- designing a preventive strategy;
- implementation; and
- monitoring.

Identifying the problem Many agencies attempt the first step by means of incident reports. It is necessary, though, to establish how complete a picture of the problem (or non-problem) incident reports provide. Thus, managers might consider low key inquiries designed to establish those points in the customer service system experiencing client aggression and in what forms (being careful not to create anxiety among subordinates by artificially creating a problem). If no uniform reporting system is in place, such inquiries will constitute the primary means of establishing the existence or dimensions of client aggression in an office.

Managers attempting to assess the nature of client inflicted aggression in their respective offices will normally end up with one or other of three results:

- no problem;
- problem well identified and managed; and
- greater problem existing than previously thought, preventive strategy required.

Either of the first two results will generally mean no change with the possible exception of a decision to review the situation periodically, in which case data will need to be collected.

Initiating data collection The basis of any client aggression data collection system is the incident report. Pro formas already in use may be adequate or they may be deficient in some way. They may be so complex staff cannot be bothered to complete them in other than the most serious of cases. Thus, managers, in conjunction with staff and occupational health and safety representatives should review and/or design an appropriate form. There

is excellent form design computer software available to aid with the task. When a new report form is introduced it should contain information as to when and how it should be completed. Care should be taken to introduce employees to the form. In-office training might also be useful. Care should be taken to ensure that one copy of each report ends up with the person or section exercising central responsibility for staff protection. There is little point in having well developed forms if they end up on personal files only. Monitoring and evaluation must be undertaken at both local and central levels.

Incident report forms should tread the fine line between requiring all necessary information for administrative and analysis purposes while at the same time not be so demanding as to dissuade employees from completing them properly. As an absolute minimum incident reports should include:

- details of aggressor;
- details of employee(s);
- details of time/place; and
- brief narrative of events.

Describing the problem Sound prevention strategies are necessarily based on a clear understanding of the nature of a problem. Incidents of client aggression inflicted on public contact officers at any particular location, for example, might all be similar or they might vary considerably. They might occur in waiting rooms only, at counters only or in interviewing rooms only. Comprehensive data collection will permit the clear identification of types of aggression. Closer analysis might show that all assaults occur between 2.00 p.m. and 3.00 p.m. on Thursdays and Fridays, for example, and to involve alcohol or, that most incidents were preceded by client waits in excess of 30 minutes. Such information provides great scope for prevention strategy formulation.

Searching for preventive measures As soon as key types of aggression have been identified, managers and others are in a position to seek means whereby such aggression can be avoided, directly and indirectly. Such means will involve clients, employees, physical environment, procedures, work design, training and selection.

Designing a preventive strategy A preventive strategy involves the preparation of a coordinated program designed to reduce client inflicted aggression on counter and interviewing officers to a minimum. That preparation requires consultation with all parties involved, design of physical barriers by specialists, writing of procedures, costing and promulgation.

Implementation Some measures, by reason of cost, for example, might only be possible in the long term. Thus, each strategy needs to allow for differential implementation of its various elements over time and space.

Monitoring and evaluation Monitoring of preventive strategies is necessary for two major reasons: to ensure implementation is undertaken as planned, and to enable modification when hiccups occur. Strategies are rarely perfectly planned because circumstances change. Only by monitoring can flaws be detected and adjustments made.

In the longer term periodic evaluation is desirable to ensure strategies remain on track.

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Crime prevention series

General Editor Paul R. Wilson

Protecting Counter and Interviewing Staff from Client Aggression is a valuable contribution to the reduction of workplace violence. The authors discuss various forms of workplace aggression, public contact environment, personal contact skills, terminating client contact and post incident administration. The approach adopted is prevention oriented and is directed at personnel and office managers concerned to protect their staff from client imposed aggression.

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