

## **Physician Office Safety** **Ann Spicer, EVP**

Your office staff should be properly trained to handle threats and know how to identify suspicious packages and letters. Knowing the appropriate way to handle such situations can vastly improve law enforcement's chances of not only identifying the person making the threat, but also securing an arrest and conviction.

Virtually any employee in your office could receive such a threat, so everyone should be trained how to handle such a call. Gathering exact information is very important. For example, what was the exact time of the call and what were the exact words of the caller?

Do not be afraid to ask questions of the caller. When will the bomb explode? Where is the bomb? What does it look like? What kind of bomb is it? What is your name? Where do you live? Where are you calling from? Why did you place the bomb?

Make a conscious effort to note whether the caller's voice is calm or excited. Is the caller making an effort to disguise his or her voice? Can you guess the person's age by the voice? Does the voice sound familiar? Could you hear any background noise on the call?

Any threat received by telephone should be immediately reported to the local police and FBI.

Employees having occasion to accept delivery of packages or open mail should also be trained to identify suspicious packages and letters. Following are characteristics to look for:

- an unusual or unknown place of origin
- no return address
- an excessive amount of postage
- abnormal or unusual size
- oily stains on the package
- wires or strings protruding from or attached to an item
- incorrect spelling on a package label
- differing return address and postmark
- peculiar odor (many explosives smell like shoe polish or almonds)
- unusual weight
- uneven balance or shape
- springiness in the top, bottom or sides

Never cut tape, strings or other wrappings on a suspicious package. Never immerse a suspicious letter or package in water. Either of these actions could cause an explosive device to detonate. Never touch or move a suspicious package or letter. Again, the local police and FBI should be notified immediately.

The best way to deal with the unnerving experience of receiving a threatening package, letter or phone call is to prepare and learn what to do before it happens.

Additional information on physician safety issues is available on the American Academy of Family Physicians (AAFP) Web site at <http://www.aafp.org/online/en/home/practicemgt/specialtopics/physiciansafety.html>.

This section of the AAFP Web site includes procedures and tips on:

- reporting threats of violence or acts of violence
- personal security checklists for home, business and vehicles
- bomb threats and personal threats received by telephone
- personal threats received by telephone
- bombs and suspicious packages and letters