Addressing bullying and harassment of doctors in the workplace and promoting dignity at work

Background

Everyone deserves to be treated with dignity and respect at work, and we all have a role to play in making sure that happens. Bullying and harassment of any kind is not acceptable and should not be tolerated – it can severely harm doctors’ well-being and patient care.

What we know

Bullying and harassment is at high levels in the NHS

- 22% of NHS doctors and dentists experienced bullying and harassment in 2016.

Why might this be happening?

- Organisational culture – the dominant attitudes and behaviours in an organisation can create a climate for bullying
- Workload pressure – managerial targets can fuel bullying behaviours, often from people who are stressed and aggressive in their approach to managing others
- Professional hierarchy – the more hierarchical an organisation is, the more likely its incidences of bullying. Healthcare settings are among the most hierarchical
- Bystander silence – given the scale of under-reporting and the fear of repercussions, doctors who witness bullying may choose to stay silent – allowing bullying to go unchallenged.

What employers don’t know

A minority of doctors report incidents to their employer

- Only 33% of those who suffered workplace bullying or harassment, in 2016, reported the incident, and trainee doctors were least likely to take action.

What is the BMA doing about it?

- Our advisors support doctors in over 500 cases of bullying and harassment per year
- Our industrial relations officers handle collective issues and negotiate with employers to improve policies, procedures and practices
- BMA Counselling is a 24-hour, seven-days-a-week service for doctors in difficulty
- A BMJ e-learning module is available to improve members’ awareness of the issue, reflect on their own behaviour and encourage those who experience bullying to seek support early
- We’re working with doctors at all grades and branches of practice, identifying the issues that fuel bullying and prevent them from speaking up
- We’re learning from cases in which we’ve supported members, to see what more we can do to ensure employers effectively prevent and resolve bullying and harassment
- We have endorsed, with other trade unions and NHS employers, the Social Partnership Forum’s Collective Call to Action to promote a positive workplace culture. In 2018, we hope to continue working with other professional groups and NHS organisations to drive out bullying at work

Who’s affected?

- Consultants – 23% said they experienced workplace bullying, harassment or abuse in 2016.
- Trainees – 24% said they experienced workplace bullying, harassment or abuse in 2016.
- Other doctors and dentist – 20% said they experienced workplace bullying, harassment or abuse in 2016.

All grades are affected – 23% of consultants, 20% of trainees and 24% of other doctors and dentists (including SAS doctors) said they experienced workplace bullying, harassment or abuse in 2016.

The risk is greater for staff who are:
- disabled – 32% of NHS staff with disabilities experienced bullying or harassment
- LGBT – 27-30%, compared to 22% of heterosexual staff
- black or from other minority ethnic groups – 24% of BME staff, compared to 22% of white British staff
- woman – slightly more likely to be bullied or harassed than men, and significantly more likely to suffer sexual harassment.

If you are a BMA member affected by these issues, contact our advisors by calling 0300 123 1233 or visiting bma.org.uk/contact-bma, or see how to contact your local BMA representative at bma.org.uk/about-us/how-we-work/local-representation.