

Poison Pen Letters On Bullying, Sexual Harassment Show Doctors Distrust The System — MMA

By CodeBlue | 20 March 2024

MMA says poison pen letters by doctors on bullying or sexual harassment are likely because they distrust the system. In a Sept 2023 case of bullying in a Sabah public hospital, complainants said bullying persisted despite MMA forwarding the matter to MOH.



Malaysian Medical Association (MMA) president Dr Azizan Abdul Aziz. Photo courtesy of MMA.

Doctors must respect due process by reporting incidents of bullying using official channels.

We urge public health care doctors to either lodge a report via SISPA (Sistem Pengurusan Aduan Awam), the Ministry of Health's MyHelp portal, MMA's HelpDoc or make a police report, rather than seek justice via trial by media.

It is troubling to see [poison pen letters circulating on social media](#). However it is time MOH looks into the reasons why its doctors are taking to other means such as social media to be heard. One likely reason is a lack of trust in the system.

For victims of workplace bullying, every moment endured is significant. It can be disheartening when reports on bullying are met with sluggish responses and minimal action, which can result in perpetrators evading consequences.

In September 2023, a group of doctors from a Sabah public hospital used MMA's HelpDoc channel to report what appeared to be a clear-cut case of bullying involving specialists and several medical officers.

We appropriately escalated the matter to the MOH and was duly informed that the case was being investigated. However, the same complainants recently contacted MMA to report that the bullying has not stopped.

This could mean that something is not right with the system.

The MMA therefore calls on the MOH to:

1. Establish SOPs in the reporting and management of bullying cases
2. Establish a timeline to complete investigations and resolve cases.
3. Look into limiting certain powers given to heads of departments and hospital directors to allow for a fair hearing of bullying cases.
4. Include independent panel members in its integrity unit for a fair hearing of bullying cases.

The Health Ministry's establishment of the Healthcare Work Culture Improvement Taskforce (HWCITF) in 2022 to review the work culture in public health care was a step in the right direction, but there was no follow through with the implementation of any of its recommendations. The government must explain why, especially if it involved taxpayers' money.

The MMA also put forward numerous solutions to combat bullying, yet none were adopted. Many of our proposals didn't even entail any additional expenditure of public funds.

One suggestion was to hold hospital directors and department heads accountable for any cases of bullying.

The MMA once again emphasises that bullying poses a grave risk to both patient and healthcare worker safety and must be treated with the utmost seriousness.

We applaud the Health Minister for stating his strong stand against bullying and hope that there will soon be engagement on the matter as there is an urgent need for systemic changes to ensure a safe and supportive environment for all healthcare professionals.

Public health care workforce morale is currently at an all time low given the five-year trend of resignations amongst contract doctors and specialists in public health care. Failing to effectively address bullying will undoubtedly exacerbate this issue.

Lastly, we urge the MOH to take advantage of MMA's Rights and Responsibilities of Government Doctors Seminar to be held on April 20, 2024 in Melaka as an opportunity to engage with government doctors and address any of their concerns. The seminar, held annually since 2008, includes talks by top MOH officials on the rights and responsibilities of public health care doctors.

Dr Azizan Abdul Aziz is the president of the Malaysian Medical Association (MMA).

- This is the personal opinion of the writer or publication and does not necessarily represent the views of *CodeBlue*.