

Bullying and harassment faced by one third of emergency doctors

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One third of emergency doctors in Australian hospitals face workplace bullying and harassment, according to a new national survey.

In the survey of over 2,100 members of the Australasian College for Emergency Medicine (ACEM), physicians cited their experiences of bullying and harassment at work.

Key points

- Verbal abuse and personal attacks reported
- Of the 20 percent reporting bullying and discrimination, 6 percent experienced sexual harassment
- Bullying tends to target female doctors, trainees and foreign-trained doctors



Physicians reported being humiliated while presenting their patients' cases to other doctors and being verbally abused by their peers. Trainees faced personal attacks when seeking feedback about their job performance.

President Tony Lawler has said he felt "sickened" when he read the results. "It is a tragedy that any individual would feel so disempowered and threatened in their workplace that is supposed to be a safe and supported place for them," he said.

The national survey comes after a 2013 Beyond Blue survey of 14,000 medical students and doctors found that an alarming 1 in 5 medical students had had thoughts of suicide, compared to 1 in 45 in the general population.

Doctors describe public humiliation and discrimination

The survey described Australian doctors in emergency departments as undergoing "ongoing, severe, daily bullying". This abusive treatment raises concerns about how it impairs doctors' performance. It also sparks fears about patient safety.

One doctor said, "I was yelled at in front of patients and colleagues, and then taken to an empty corridor and yelled at some more". Another reported a "consultant [doctor] yelling and shaming me in public".

Female trainees more likely to be discriminated and sexually harassed

Female trainees were singled out for discrimination. A respondent says she was told “not to apply for a resident job if they planned on getting pregnant”. Another says she had to endure “unwanted touching, sexual remarks and requests for sex whilst on a conference with a consultant I work with”.

Over 20 percent of those surveyed experienced harassment, with more than 6 percent experiencing sexual harassment.

In 2006, a senior surgeon at Monash Medical Centre was accused of sexually sexually harassing one of his trainees, Caroline Tan. Ms Tan won the case and was awarded AUD\$100,000 damages by the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal.

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