

# Addressing workplace bullying

## a guide for junior doctors

This document outlines what to do if you are subjected to workplace bullying. It is not intended to be a definitive guide and you may need to seek advice to work out the best course of action for your circumstances.

### Definition of workplace bullying

There are various definitions of bullying, a definition from the Safe Work SA is:

**Workplace bullying** is repeated and unreasonable behaviour directed towards a worker or a group of workers that creates a risk to health and safety.

**Repeated behaviour** refers to the persistent nature of the behaviour and can involve a range of behaviours over time.

**Unreasonable behaviour** means behaviour that a reasonable person, having considered the circumstances, would see as unreasonable, including behaviour that is victimising, humiliating, intimidating or threatening.

The key points are that the action has to be repeated and be unreasonable. It may create a risk to health and safety because it may affect your physical and/or mental health. However, not everything that makes a person feel upset or undervalued at work is workplace bullying.

### Bullying actions could include

- > Discrimination, including e.g. sexist/racist/homophobic comments/conduct (*Equal Opportunity Act 1984 (SA)*)
- > Aggressive conduct or verbal/physical intimidation
- > Abusive, insulting or offensive language or comments
- > Victimisation
- > Belittling, hurtful or humiliating conduct
- > Unjustified criticism or complaints
- > Spreading malicious rumours or making fun of you or your work
- > Unwanted teasing, practical jokes or 'initiation ceremonies'
- > Exclusion from work-related events
- > Unreasonable work expectations, including too much or too little work, or work below or beyond a worker's skill level
- > Displaying offensive material
- > Pressure to behave in an inappropriate manner
- > Sexual harassment or assault (*Equal Opportunity Act 1984 (SA)*)
- > Unreasonable punishment or vindictive behaviour
- > Gaslighting (subtle undermining)

A single incident of any of the above is not workplace bullying but it might escalate into a pattern of behaviour that would constitute bullying. It is best to address the incident before a pattern develops.

## How your health and safety could be affected – you might

- > Be less active or successful
- > Be less confident in your work or second-guess yourself
- > Feel scared, stressed, anxious or depressed
- > Have your life outside of work affected, e.g. study, relationships
- > Want to stay away from work or feel stress or fear about going to work
- > Feel like you can't trust your employer or the people who you work with
- > Lack confidence and happiness about yourself and your work
- > Have physical signs of stress like headaches, backaches, sleep problems

Bullying can lead to serious mental health consequences including anxiety or depression.

## Your rights

You have the right to be in a safe workplace free from violence, harassment and bullying.

We all have a responsibility to help create a positive, safe workplace. If you see someone in your workplace experiencing harassment or bullying, you can support them by advising them about the steps they can take to solve it.

In medicine there can be a culture of passivity/not taking action on bullying. It is important that we all work together to address bullying and not accept bullying happening to other people. Lieutenant General David Morrison stated in 2013 *"The standard you walk past is the standard you accept"*. We need to support our colleagues who are experiencing bullying and work together to change the culture that allows bullying to continue.

## Options for addressing workplace bullying

It often takes some time to realise that you are being subjected to bullying. As soon as you realise it's happening, it's important to start documenting problematic interactions. It's important to keep a record of events as they happen. This will help you to remember later on and can be used to support a complaint (if you make one).

Bullying behaviour may or may not be witnessed by other people. The lack of witnesses should not deter you from making a complaint, but it can support a complaint if there are other people to describe what happened.

## Informal options

- > Make sure you are informed
  - > Refer to the Management of Disrespectful Behaviour Policy Guideline <http://inside.sahealth.sa.gov.au/wps/wcm/connect/non-public+content/sa+health+intranet/business+units/health+system+development/office+of+the+chief+executive/policies/guidelines/management+of+disrespectful+behaviour+policy+guideline> and Respectful Behaviour Policy Directive <http://inside.sahealth.sa.gov.au/wps/wcm/connect/non-public+content/sa+health+intranet/business+units/health+system+development/office+of+the+chief+executive/policies/directives/respectful+behaviour+policy>
- > Talk to someone
  - > A mentor
  - > A senior in your team or another team
  - > The Medical Education Unit
  - > Director of Clinical Training or the Director of Medical Services
  - > Medical Education Officers
  - > South Australian Medical Education and Training Unit (SA MET)
  - > The South Australian Salaried Medical Officers Association (SASMOA)
  - > Employee assistance program <http://inside.sahealth.sa.gov.au/wps/wcm/connect/non-public+content/sa+health+intranet/business+units/workforce/workforce+development+and+improvement/recognising+and+supporting+staff/eap>
  - > Doctors Health SA [www.doctorshealthsa.com.au](http://www.doctorshealthsa.com.au)
  - > Debrief with colleagues or friends

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- > Approach the other person
  - > Depends on the circumstance, but if you feel comfortable you could informally approach the person and explain that their behaviour is making you uncomfortable.
  - > If you do decide to deal with the situation personally you should act sooner rather than later and you may find it helpful to use the DESC script:

**Describe:** *When you describe the action* e.g. swear and call me names in front of the patient, like you have just done while we were examining Mr Smith...

**Express:** ...it made me feel uncomfortable and upset. I find it difficult to continue examining the patient and I believe that the things you are saying affect the patient's confidence in my abilities. This behaviour is bullying.

**Specify the desired outcome:** I am asking that you stop this behaviour and treat me with respect at all times.

**Consequences:** If you choose to continue with this behaviour I will make a formal complaint.

**Describe:** *Describe what is happening to you* e.g. The constant belittling of me and prevention of me accessing learning opportunities,

**Express:** results in me feeling uncomfortable working with you and upsets me and is stopping me from improving my professional skills. This is bullying and is unprofessional behaviour.

**Specify the desired outcome:** I am asking that you stop this behaviour and treat me with respect at all times and to stop preventing me from accessing learning opportunities.

**Consequences:** By stopping your behaviour we will be able to work together and achieve better outcomes for our patients.

- > Do not be discouraged if these informal approaches don't work – they may not. You can take more formal options (noted below).
- > Look after your mental and physical health.
  - There is always someone to talk to – whether a friend, family member, colleague or a support service see the list below.
  - The contact details for Lifeline and Beyond Blue are included at the end of this document.

## Formal complaints mechanisms

A formal complaint must be made in writing to an Executive/Director and include the following:

- > The name of the person accused of bullying
- > The description of the behaviour and how this is bullying
- > An explanation of what steps have been undertaken so far e.g. the informal process
- > The names of possible witnesses and what event or behaviour they observed

SASMOA can help drafting a complaint and assist you in the formal process.

When a formal complaint is made against a staff member the Executive/Director in conjunction with HR may:

- > Speak to the parties concerned and/or their representatives
- > Determine if formal mediation should be undertaken
- > Proceed to a formal investigation under Section 4-1-7, Managing unsatisfactory performance, discipline and termination) of the SA Health (Health Care Act) Human Resources Manual  
[http://inside.sahealth.sa.gov.au/wps/wcm/connect/5db83000440db5c0ba7dbf63794072bf/HR+Manual\\_Oct+2016+Update+Tracked.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&CACHEID=5db83000440db5c0ba7dbf63794072bf](http://inside.sahealth.sa.gov.au/wps/wcm/connect/5db83000440db5c0ba7dbf63794072bf/HR+Manual_Oct+2016+Update+Tracked.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&CACHEID=5db83000440db5c0ba7dbf63794072bf)

External options

- > You may contact the Police if your physical safety is threatened or you are harmed. Notification to SA Health representative should have occurred as well.
- > Other agencies such as Doctors Health SA [www.doctorshealthsa.com.au/](http://www.doctorshealthsa.com.au/)

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## Where to go for help

- > Your Medical Education Unit:
  - Medical Education Officer
  - Director of Clinical Training
  - Director of Medical Training
- > Your supervisor
- > The local HR Team
- > SA MET Unit
- > JMO forum representative
- > Your GP
- > Doctors Health SA [www.doctorshealthsa.com.au](http://www.doctorshealthsa.com.au)
- > Mental health services
  - Beyond Blue [www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au)
  - Lifeline 13 11 14 [www.lifeline.org.au](http://www.lifeline.org.au)
- > Employee Assistance Program  
<http://inside.sahealth.sa.gov.au/wps/wcm/connect/non-public+content/sa+health+intranet/business+units/workforce/workforce+development+and+improvement/recognising+and+supporting+staff/eap>
- > SASMOA – ring or email them for advice

## Resources used to prepare this document

Safe Work Australia, 'Dealing with workplace bullying – a worker's guide' (May 2016),  
<https://www.safeworkaustralia.gov.au/doc/dealing-workplace-bullying-workers-guide>

Fair Work Commission website, 'Anti Bullying' (National legislation but does not cover State Government in SA)  
<https://www.fwc.gov.au/disputes-at-work/anti-bullying>

Australian Human Rights Commission website, 'Workplace bullying: Violence, Harassment and Bullying Fact Sheet'  
<https://www.humanrights.gov.au/workplace-bullying-violence-harassment-and-bullying-fact-sheet>

SA Health's Management of Disrespectful Behaviour Guideline  
<http://inside.sahealth.sa.gov.au/wps/wcm/connect/non-public+content/sa+health+intranet/business+units/health+system+development/office+of+the+chief+executive/policies/guidelines/management+of+disrespectful+behaviour+policy+guideline>

SA Health's Respectful Behaviour Policy  
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*Thank you to the colleagues who have reviewed this document.*

## For more information

**SA Health**  
**11 Hindmarsh Square**  
**Adelaide SA 5000**  
**[www.sahealth.sa.gov.au](http://www.sahealth.sa.gov.au)**



[www.ausgoal.gov.au/creative-commons](http://www.ausgoal.gov.au/creative-commons)

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