

# Harassment on placements: A fact sheet for medical students

## Overview

Harassment is a serious issue that can be faced by medical students during clinical placements. It can significantly impact mental health, educational experiences, and professional development. Understanding, recognizing, and addressing harassment is crucial to creating a safer and more inclusive learning environment.

## Definition of harassment

Harassment in the workplace is any unwanted behaviour—verbal, physical, or online—that creates a hostile or intimidating environment. It is characterized by unwelcome comments or actions that demean, humiliate, or violate an individual's dignity. Harassment can be based on various factors, including gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, disability, or power dynamics.

## Types of harassment

Harassment can manifest in various forms, including:



- **Verbal harassment:** Insults, offensive jokes, derogatory comments, or sexual innuendo.
- **Physical harassment:** Unwanted touching, physical intimidation, or assault.
- **Sexual harassment:** Unwanted sexual advances, inappropriate remarks, suggestive behaviour, or pressure for sexual favours.
- **Discriminatory harassment:** Comments or behaviours based on race, gender, sexual orientation, or other protected characteristics.
- **Power harassment:** Misuse of authority or rank to intimidate, belittle, or exploit students.
- **Cyber harassment:** Inappropriate use of digital platforms to harass or intimidate.

## Facts about harassment in medical placements



- **Prevalence:** Surveys indicate that up to 30% of medical students report experiencing some form of harassment during placements.
- **Sources of harassment:** Harassment can come from a variety of individuals, including supervising doctors, nursing staff, administrative personnel, and even patients or their families.
- **High-risk groups:** Female students, LGBTQ+ individuals, and those from ethnic or racial minorities are more likely to face harassment.
- **Underreporting:** Due to fear of repercussions, shame, or uncertainty about what constitutes harassment, many incidents go unreported.

## Impact of harassment on medical students



- **Mental health:** Increased risk of anxiety, depression, stress, and burnout.
- **Educational and professional impact:** Reduced confidence, impaired clinical performance, reluctance to ask questions, and avoidance of certain specialties or settings.
- **Physical health:** Sleep disturbances, headaches, gastrointestinal issues, and other stress-related conditions.
- **Career progression:** Harassment may lead to a desire to leave the medical field, change specialties, or abandon placements.



Seek support:  
Medical School  
Student Support

# Harassment on placements: A fact sheet for medical students cont'd.

## Signs that you might be experiencing harassment



- Receiving unwelcome comments about your appearance, gender, or race.
- Being pressured into uncomfortable situations or conversations.
- Experiencing unsolicited physical contact or inappropriate gestures.
- Being targeted with belittling or patronizing comments that undermine your competence.
- Feeling uneasy or threatened in the presence of a particular individual or group.
- Repeated unwanted attention in person or via digital platforms.

## What to do if you experience or witness harassment



- 1. Recognize and name it:** Understand that harassment is never acceptable and trust your feelings if you feel uncomfortable.
- 2. Document the behaviour:** Keep a detailed record of the incidents, including dates, times, locations, people involved, and any witnesses.
- 3. Seek support:** Speak to medical student support or your student coordinator at your clinical site. [Support for students experiencing discrimination, harassment or bullying behaviours - Medical School - University of Queensland \(uq.edu.au\)](https://www.uq.edu.au/medical-school/support-for-students-experiencing-discrimination-harassment-or-bullying-behaviours)
- 4. Report it:** Medical student support will explain options for you to report the harassment, and options for your continuing placement.
- 5. Take care of yourself:** Prioritise your mental and physical well-being. Seek UQ counselling and the [Sexual Misconduct Support Unit \(SMSU\) - Respect - University of Queensland \(uq.edu.au\)](https://www.uq.edu.au/sexual-misconduct-support-unit-smsu-respect)

## What to do if a peer or colleague is being harassed



- **Listen and validate:** Be supportive and acknowledge their experience without judgment.
- **Offer help:** Assist in documenting the behaviour and encourage them to seek help.
- **Avoid blame:** Never suggest that the victim is responsible for the harassment.
- **Support reporting:** Encourage them to reach out for support with medical student support.

## Creating a safer placement environment



- **Raise awareness:** Encourage conversations about harassment and create a culture of zero tolerance.
- **Establish boundaries:** Know and communicate your boundaries clearly and assertively.
- **Promote a respectful culture:** Advocate for inclusivity and support among your peers and supervisors.

## Resources and support for medical students



- [Support for students experiencing discrimination, harassment or bullying behaviours - Medical School - University of Queensland \(uq.edu.au\)](https://www.uq.edu.au/medical-school/support-for-students-experiencing-discrimination-harassment-or-bullying-behaviours)
- [Support options for Medical School students - Medical School - University of Queensland \(uq.edu.au\)](https://www.uq.edu.au/medical-school/support-options-for-medical-school-students)
- [Sexual Misconduct Support Unit \(SMSU\) - Respect - University of Queensland \(uq.edu.au\)](https://www.uq.edu.au/sexual-misconduct-support-unit-smsu-respect)

Harassment should never be tolerated in any form. If you experience or witness harassment during your placements, speak up, seek support, and report the incident. Prioritising your safety, well-being, and professional integrity is essential.



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