

SOUTH AFRICAN COMMITTEE OF MEDICAL DEANS

Consensus statement regarding academic bullying and victimisation on clinical training and health care platforms

The commemoration of June 16, Youth Day, reminds us of the contribution that young people have made to the building of our democratic society. Within this context, the SACOMD wishes to acknowledge the significant role played by young health professionals, especially doctors, in the care of our nation while enhancing their skills to care for the vulnerable.

SACOMD is concerned about sporadic reports of academic bullying in the health care working and training environment affecting medical students, interns, community service doctors, registrars and junior consultants. We recognise the hierarchical power dynamics which may prevail in clinical relationships. Our junior colleagues rely on supervisors to fulfil respective registration requirements with the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA) or for the fulfilment of their performance reviews. SACOMD wishes to highlight the vulnerable position the junior health care professionals are exposed to when there is victimisation or bullying in the workplace.

Colleagues across the different clinical platforms are urged to ensure that junior doctors are supported and supervised to carry out their responsibilities while also ensuring that their rights to dignity and collegiality are respected. This requires supervisors and junior doctors alike to practice according to the ethical guidelines for the profession while observing a code of conduct guided by mutual respect, professionalism, compassion and collegiality. SACOMD envisages a situation wherein there is mutual respect from both parties, whilst ensuring that colleagues abide by the rules and expectations of their job description, and teaching responsibilities. Students and junior doctors have responsibilities they must meet pertaining to their clinical work and academic requirements. An extension of these responsibilities includes ensuring that allegations of academic bullying are not a means of addressing limitations with or failure to meet academic and clinical tasks or requirements.

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Clear policies on identifying and addressing bullying and victimisation in these academic and clinical spaces are essential. These need to provide a clear, step-by-step guide to empower junior doctors on how to tackle these challenges should they encounter them.

SACOMD condemns, in the strongest terms, any perpetuation of victimisation and bullying in the medical profession.

SACOMD also recognises that all medical professionals have an inherent responsibility to ensure that institutionalised academic bullying is actively discouraged and rooted out, for the sake of guarding the profession and its inherent ethical principles and values.

This consensus statement requests all affiliated Universities, Health Departments and training institutions to

- endorse these sentiments, and
- implement relevant policies and practices within their academic units and health care workplaces to create environments free of bullying.

This is a call to action for all colleagues to take proactive steps to address this across all health care environments where bullying and victimisation is observed or may be present.

Let us join forces to end the vicious cycle of bullying so that the ethos of caring, compassion and healing may characterise both the profession and the professionals of our noble profession.

END