INTRODUCTION

Sexual harassment and bullying in the workplace in the medical workforce has been a prominent recent issue for the profession in Australia and in particular the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons [1-5]. Published reports and surveys suggest that this is a common problem, both here and in other countries, with up to three quarters of women experiencing sexual harassment in the workplace [6-13]. Men are also harassed and bullied but less frequently [8,9]. Within the medical hierarchy medical students are in a particularly vulnerable position, by virtue of being in the most junior position and in most circumstances not having the protection of being an employee [8-13].

We hypothesized that, medical students, who are resident throughout the Australian Rural Clinical School (RCS) network may be more exposed to harassment and bullying by virtue of the small community that they live, work and study in. This study came about because of the issue and tradition of inviting medical students into the homes of some individual RCS faculty
Anecdotally faculty felt that this was a hospitable act and one of welcome to students, whereas students sometimes felt uncomfortable with such invitations and certainly felt that they could not decline them. Faced with this dilemma one of the faculty member and a group of students decided to survey both staff and faculty about their attitudes to a variety of social situations of different appropriateness. The aim of the survey was to determine if there were differences between what staff and faculty viewed as appropriate social situations.

**METHODS**

Approval to undertake this study was granted from the Tasmanian Human Research Ethics Committee as a low risk study (H0012347). The survey used a simple Likert scale and was given separately to both 4th year and 5th year students during a group learning week in 2012. The survey was in two parts. The first part asked questions about the respondent’s actual experiences with student and faculty social situations. The second part of the survey was a set of five different hypothetical social situations of different appropriateness, ranging from communal public gatherings to at the other extreme a one on one situation that subjectively could be interpreted as a “date.” Both the questions and scenarios were derived by an iterative process between the student researchers.

The survey was undertaken at the Tasmanian RCS in Burnie, Tasmania. Senior faculty did not allow the students to survey the faculty. Due to the small number of potential respondents, at a single site, the survey was intended for use as a pilot to validate the survey questionnaire (Appendix 1) with a view to application throughout the Australian RCS network in a more definitive study. The results were entered into an excel spreadsheet and descriptive statistics were used to display the frequency of response to each social situation.

**RESULTS**

There were 53 responses to the survey from students (100% response rate) 27 being 4th years and 26 being 5th years. There were no responses from faculty. 27 respondents (50.9%) were male and 34 (64.1%) were of Caucasian ethnicity. In response to the questions most students (51, 96.2%) responded that they had been asked to participate in a social situation with faculty with most students (51, 96.2%) being either “completely at ease” or “comfortable” with the invitation. Only one respondent reported being “uncomfortable” with the invitation. Two students responded that they had taken part in a social interaction with faculty that in their opinion was inappropriate.

When asked what type of social interaction would be appropriate for students and faculty, the vast majority indicated either a “casual communal barbeque at the RCS or neutral facility” or “small group interaction at a location other than the RCS.” No students responded to the “no social interaction” option. Two students indicated that the most appropriate social interaction would be “one on one interaction in a private location.”

With respect to the hypothetical scenarios the majority of students were either “completely at ease” or “comfortable” with the first two situations of either a communal barbeque or small group interaction at the hospital café [Figures 1 and 2]. Scenarios three and four where the social situation moved to an individual invitation outside of the RCS or hospital had a more mixed degree of comfort from the students [Figures 3 and 4]. Eight students were either “completely at ease” or “comfortable” with the overt “date” scenario. Although 14 students responded that they would not accept such an invitation, eighteen would do so even though they felt “uncomfortable” in doing so [Figure 5].

**DISCUSSION**

**Main Findings**

All students felt that some sort of social interaction between staff and faculty was appropriate with the vast majority opting for a communal function in a public location or the RCS itself. Although only two students had ever received an inappropriate social invitation, a significant minority would attend the last hypothetical situation which subjectively was a “date.” This survey did not ask the respondents for the rationale of their options, so we cannot answer the question as to why the students would go along with such an invitation. The question...
that triggered the research, namely the appropriateness, of the dinner invitation to the faculty member’s home was answered with a mixed response. This suggests that not all students are comfortable with this type of hospitality.

**Study Limitations**

The major limitation of this study was the faculty intervention that did not allow for individual faculty members to participate in the survey, which meant that the primary aim of the study could not be fulfilled. However, this intervention, in itself suggests a certain amount of sensitivity to social interactions between faculty and students. This type of survey and methodology, undertaken in 2012 would probably be more acceptable today after all the issues of harassment in the profession were publicized in 2015. It is possible, that such a survey could provide information, on where to draw the line on appropriate social interactions within the profession particularly in instances where the hierarchical power differential is significant.

Although this study had a high response rate, the number of participants was low, and the study was only undertaken at one RCS. These limitations affect the generalizability of the results, however, this methodology could be used to survey the entire Australian medical student population. It is the intention of the authors to use this pilot study to inform a much larger study and associated grant applications.

**CONCLUSION**

This small survey suggests that social interactions between faculty and students are appropriate and that this should occur in a communal setting in a public place. Not all students are comfortable with other more personal, although hospitable, invitations. More research is needed to understand the factors behind some student’s motivation to attend more personal invitations.

**REFERENCES**


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