BMA Briefing Note

Rules and Realities for Behaviour at Work

Introduction
All employees, including doctors, have the right to work in an environment which promotes equality, harmony and collaborative working arrangements, all to the benefit of patients. With this right comes a number of responsibilities, one of which is how an individual behaves towards others at work, as this behaviour will impact on colleagues and their rights in the workplace.

As professionals, doctors are expected to have integrity, and to be honest and open. You are expected to act in a courteous, dignified and considerate manner towards your patients, colleagues and others involved in the provision of health care. In summary, you are expected to behave in a professional manner.

The purpose of this document is to provide you with guidance as to the types of behaviours that can contribute to a collaborative and supportive working environment and to help you deal constructively with those behaviours that have a negative impact within the workplace.

Having a bad day?
A doctor is expected to take responsibility for her or his behaviour. Occasionally there are incidents in the workplace which have repercussions within the team, which have the potential to affect patients and colleagues. An incident may be one-off, or a combination of several events, but it is how the incident is managed by the individuals concerned that determines the extent of the impact on others.

Doctors should act as positive role models and try to motivate and inspire colleagues in line with Good Medical Practice. Often, however, if the incident is not effectively managed by immediate intervention, the result may be that the incident is investigated further, on a more formal basis, in line with your employer’s relevant policies.

It is good practice for all employers, including GPs, to have workplace policies in place. As a minimum, it is recommended that a GP, as an employer, has policies in place to manage: recruitment and selection; harassment and bullying; disciplinary actions; grievance procedures; sickness absence; and complaints.

Often it is an individual’s behaviour which is at the centre of an incident. Data from the National Clinical Assessment Service (NCAS) suggest that behaviour in work is the leading concern across all medical specialities when referrals are made for further investigation by NCAS.

Clearly, it is not in anyone’s interest for a behaviour-related incident to escalate. By considering what behaviour is unacceptable in the workplace and by complying with employer policies and procedures, it is likely that incidents will be resolved at an earlier stage and the healthcare team will be able to focus on working together for the benefit of the patient. It is therefore in your interest to ensure that you have read and understood your employer’s policies, in particular the harassment and bullying policy.

What’s unacceptable?
If the behaviour described below occurs and interferes with your ability to work with others to the extent that the delivery of quality health care may be impeded, it is likely to be unacceptable.

Inappropriate Words
- Profane, disrespectful, insulting, demeaning or abusive language
- Jokes or non-clinical comments about race, ethnicity, gender, religion, sexual orientation, age, physical appearance, socioeconomic or educational status
- Outbursts of anger
- Embarrassing others
- Humiliating or criticising colleagues or staff in front of patients, visitors or other staff
- Demeaning comments or intimidation
- Arguments with patients, family members, staff or other care providers
- Insensitive comments about the patient, for example medical condition, appearance, situation
- Rudeness
- Unwarranted negative comments about another doctor’s care (orally or in chart notes)
- Behaviour that others would describe as bullying and/or harassment

Inappropriate Actions
- Throwing or breaking things
- Refusal to comply with known and generally accepted practice standards which then impedes other team members from delivering quality care
- Use or threat of violence towards patients, family members or colleagues
- Repeated failure to respond to calls or requests for information
- Failure to pass on relevant information to colleagues
- Persistent lateness in responding to calls for assistance
- Difficultly working collaboratively or cooperatively with others
- Creating rigid or inflexible barriers to requests for assistance or cooperation
- Isolating others
- Allocation of irrelevant or inappropriate work
Behaviour is subjective, and what you do and say will be perceived differently by different colleagues. You should be aware that the behaviours outlined above may be perceived as bullying and harassment. In general terms of equality law the employee will have been subject to harassment, where, on the grounds of their particular characteristics, they are subjected to conduct which violates their dignity or creates an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment.

What should I say?
There are many things that everyone can do to ensure that the workplace is a professional, but pleasant, environment.

For example:
• Say “please”, “thank you”, “hello”
• Offer to help
• Be cooperative
• Communicate your intentions
• Recognise the contribution that other team members make
• Speak calmly and politely
• Take time to reflect on your actions, as well as those of your colleagues
• If you are simply having a bad day, be aware of it
• Think about what you say, and how you say it
• Ask for help when you need it

But I’m under so much pressure...
There may be physical or mental health reasons for unacceptable behaviour. Many doctors face stress and exhaustion through work which can contribute to unprofessional behaviour. It is up to you to seek help to address underlying causes, for example by talking to someone within Human Resources, self referring to your Occupational Health Department or contacting the BMAs Doctors for Doctors service on 08459 200 169.

Resolving a situation
Occasionally, a doctor may be involved in a workplace incident which has arisen because of either inappropriate actions by a colleague or, inadvertently, by themselves. The BMA is available to offer advice to its members in any such situation through its askBMA service on 0870 60 60 828.

If you have been caught up in an incident at work as a result of the actions of a colleague, there are a number of steps that you can follow to try to resolve the situation promptly. For example:
• Take a step back and take time to reflect on the incident – was it intentional or inadvertent? A one-off or part of a pattern?
• Try not to take it personally
• Discuss the issue with your line manager or human resources manager in confidence to seek guidance and input
• Try to resolve the issue informally yourself or ask colleague to act on your behalf
• Be firm, not aggressive. Be positive and calm. Stick to the facts and describe what has happened and how the incident made you feel
• If the behaviour continues, keep a record of incidents, for example dates and times
• Familiarise yourself with your employer’s relevant policies and procedures
• Follow your employer’s procedures if you decide to proceed with a formal complaint
• Keep a record at all times of relevant information, for example memos, emails, meeting notes and names of staff with whom you have spoken
• Seek advice from askBMA at any time

If it has been brought to your attention that you have upset a colleague or patient, inadvertently and without intent, it is suggested that you do the following in addition to the above steps:
• Apologise and resolve the situation as soon as possible
• Try and understand why your actions have upset someone
• Seek to provide or obtain relevant information, support and advice as necessary
• Take steps to ensure that the incident is not repeated

Further information
• askBMA online at www.bma.org.uk or Tel: 0870 60 60 828
• College of Surgeons and Physicians Ontario Disruptive Physician behaviour initiative. www.cpsso.on.ca
• Good Medical Practice (2006), GMC
• Maintaining High Professional Standards in the Modern HPSS – A framework for the handling of concerns about doctors and dentists in the HPSS. DHSSPS 2005
• Doctors’ Health Matters. The work of the Doctors for Doctors Unit in supporting doctors and promoting wellbeing within the profession. HPERU 2007
• BMA counseling service for members and Doctors for Doctors. Tel: 020 7383 6739, email info.d4d@bma.org.uk or fax 020 7554 6739

References
1 Any other member of staff, not just another doctor
2 Good Medical Practice 2006. General Medical Council
3 National Clinical Assessment Service Analysis of the first four year’s referral data July 2006
4 Civil discussions in which disagreement is expressed are not arguments.