

Position statement

30 June 2021

No place for sexism, sexual harassment or violence in healthcare

Respectful, professional practice and patient safety

Australia's national conversation about sexism, sexual harassment and gendered violence is an important step towards building a culture of respect in our community, including in healthcare.¹

Ahpra and National Boards want to remind registered health practitioners about the close link between respectful, professional practice and patient safety. Respect is a cornerstone of good, professional practice and it is fundamental to the Australian community's trust in registered health practitioners. A culture of respect is an important part of our healthcare system that facilitates better patient outcomes.²

Our expectations of practitioner conduct and respectful, professional behaviour, including maintaining appropriate professional boundaries, are set out in National Board codes of conduct (or equivalent).

Practitioners must always treat patients, consumers, students, employees and colleagues with respect. They must always communicate professionally and respectfully with and about others, including when using social media.

There is no place for sexism, sexual harassment or gendered violence in healthcare. Ahpra and National Boards explicitly condemn this behaviour by registered health practitioners.

By speaking up about and addressing disrespectful behaviour and unprofessional conduct, we can all help build a culture of respect in healthcare and contribute to safer care.^{3,4}

Speak up and help build a culture of respect in healthcare

Agencies, service and education providers, and individuals across the health sector (including registered health practitioners) have a role to play in building and maintaining a culture of respect in healthcare and supporting behaviour change when needed. The best place to speak up and raise your concerns will depend on the nature of the concerns.

¹ This position statement adopts the [United Nations' definition](#) of gendered violence/gender-based violence to refer to harmful acts directed at an individual or a group of individuals based on their gender. It includes violence against individuals who identify as gender diverse and those who identify as non-binary.

² Braithwaite J, Herkes J, Ludlow K, Testa L, Lamprell G. Association between organisational and workplace cultures, and patient outcomes: systematic review. *BMJ open*. 2017 Nov 1;7(11).

³ Westbrook J, Sunderland N, Li L, Koyama A, McMullan R, Urwin R, Churruca K, Baysari MT, Jones C, Loh E, McInnes EC. The prevalence and impact of unprofessional behaviour among hospital workers: a survey in seven Australian hospitals. *Medical Journal of Australia*. 2021 Jan;214(1):31-7.

⁴ Catron TF, Guillaumondegui OD, Karrass J, Cooper WO, Martin BJ, Dmochowski RR, Pichert JW, Hickson GB. Patient complaints and adverse surgical outcomes. *American Journal of Medical Quality*. 2016 Sep;31(5):415-22.

Concerns about disrespectful behaviour can often be handled locally, including raising concerns directly and as soon as practicable with the practitioner or with the practitioners' employer when applicable and appropriate.

As the health practitioner regulator, we deal with concerns about unprofessional conduct. This includes sexual harassment, which is unwelcome conduct of a sexual nature that makes a person feel offended, humiliated and/or intimidated.⁵ Comments about someone's gender expression or appearance, unwelcome touching and suggestive comments or jokes can all be sexual harassment.

Sexual harassment by registered health practitioners directly contravenes National Board codes of conduct. Ahpra and National Boards explicitly condemn this behaviour by registered health practitioners and encourage reporting to us about it.

Unprofessional conduct is contrary to our codes of conduct and some may involve criminal behaviour, which should be considered by the police in the first instance. A National Board may decide to take immediate action, such as suspending or imposing a condition on registration, to protect the public in response to allegations of criminal behaviour by a registered health practitioner.

In cases where a registered health practitioner is charged with or convicted of a serious offence, including assault, the practitioner is required by law to advise the National Board and Ahpra who will consider the need for regulatory action in order to protect the public.

You can call us on 1300 419 495 for information and advice about referral and appropriate pathways if you are not sure where to report your concerns. By speaking up and raising concerns about disrespectful behaviour or unprofessional conduct by registered health practitioners, you can support a safer healthcare system for everyone.

Professional obligations and social media

Registered health practitioners must always communicate professionally and respectfully, including on social media.

The National Boards and Ahpra have developed [Social media guidance](#) to help registered health practitioners understand and meet their professional obligations when using social media professionally and personally.

How to raise concerns about a registered health practitioner's unprofessional conduct

Concerns about unprofessional conduct, including sexual harassment, should be reported to Ahpra through the [concerns submission portal](#). For more information about raising concerns about registered health practitioners, visit the [Ahpra website](#).

National Boards will consider every case and assess whether the practitioner has breached their professional obligations.

Concerns about sexual misconduct by a registered health practitioner may require employers or registered health practitioners to make a [mandatory notification](#).

Accessing free support services, including advice about reporting

If you have experienced, are experiencing or are concerned about someone experiencing sexual assault or violence, there are free sexual assault support services that can help. These services can provide expert support and can help you decide whether or how to report to police.

1800 Respect is a confidential, free national sexual assault and domestic and family violence counselling and support service. 1800 Respect is open 24 hours a day and can be contacted by calling [1800 737 732](#) or through the online chat on their [website](#).

⁵ *Sex Discrimination Act 1984* (Cth)

Commonwealth, state and territory anti-discrimination bodies can also help with complaints about sex discrimination and sexual harassment.

About us

The 15 National Boards work in partnership with Ahpra to protect the health and safety of the public. National Boards' registration standards, codes and guidelines form part of the regulatory framework for each profession and guide the professional practice of registered health practitioners in Australia.