

Current Perspective

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Sexual Harassment and Ophthalmology

Sexual harassment allegations know no workplace boundaries. While most recent public cases involve the media and entertainment industries or government officials, other cases have touched nearly every type of organization and profession—including ophthalmology. This should not be surprising because sexual harassment frequently is driven by power differentials between the harasser and the victim, leading to feelings of vulnerability. Medicine is replete with such power relationships—between physician and staff; between professor and trainee; between senior and junior colleagues; and between physician and patient.

Harassment allegations run the gamut between single verbal episodes to patterns of frank sexual assault. The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission defines workplace sexual harassment in part as “unwelcome sexual advances or conduct of a sexual nature which ... creates an intimidating, hostile, or offensive work environment.” How many times in our professional lives have we been a witness (or a party) to a crude joke, comments of a highly personal or sexual nature—or worse? How often is such behavior rationalized by statements like, “I’ve always been a big hugger” or “I’ve always been like that and she has never complained.” (Although I use “she,” sexual harassment may be male to female, female to male, female to female, or male to male.)

As many gray zones as have been recently illuminated (for example, “when is a hug appropriate?” and “what discussion subjects cross the line?”), the #MeToo movement has created a valuable teaching moment, forcing all of us—men and women—to rethink appropriateness and inclusiveness.

Implicit in the trust and respect we receive as physicians is our responsibility to create a safe and respectful professional environment. This includes zero tolerance for inappropriate behavior that might be interpreted as constituting harassment.

What is the Academy’s role? Every Academy member agrees to abide by the Code of Ethics and its Principles. The Principles describe “model standards of exemplary professional conduct for all Fellows or Members of the Academy.” Principle 2 states in part, “Ophthalmological services must be provided with compassion, respect for human dignity, honesty, and integrity.” This applies to all involved in the care process—colleagues, staff, patients, and families.

In the 30-plus years of the Academy’s Code of Ethics, there has never been an ethics challenge involving alleged sexual harassment or sexual misconduct involving patients, colleagues, or staff. However, surveys of female physicians in multiple specialties suggest that a large percentage of women ophthalmologists have personally experienced what they perceived to be sexual harassment—verbal and/or physical—from their physician colleagues. One study of 1,066 physicians revealed that 30% of women said they had directly experienced sexual harassment in their careers, versus 4% of men.¹

Members and Fellows also deserve to understand how the Academy addresses this issue, the seriousness with which it is taken, the organizational culture we attempt to engender, and the processes we have in place to protect our staff, our volunteers, and our profession itself.

Every Academy staff member, without exception, must complete a sexual harassment training course every 2 years and acknowledge in writing familiarity with the Academy’s relevant policies. These policies acknowledge both organizational responsibility for compliance as well as individual responsibilities and reporting obligations for every employee.

Any alleged incident is taken seriously, investigated thoroughly, and (if validated) is accompanied by disciplinary action—possibly including dismissal. Regardless of the investigation outcome, retaliation against an accuser is forbidden not only by Academy policy but also under the law.

We owe it to ourselves, our patients, all members of our professional team, and to ophthalmology itself to always exhibit exemplary behavior and to make all involved feel welcome, comfortable, and respected. The Academy as an organization similarly makes that pledge.



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¹ Jagsi R et al. *JAMA*. 2016;315(19):2120-2121.