

### THE FACTS

- Historically, medicine, and in particular the field of surgery, has been male dominated. In recent times the number of female medical graduates from Australian medical schools has outnumbered their male counterparts. However, less than one third of surgical trainees are now female. The proportion of female surgeons is even lower among those who have completed fellowship training. This is in contrast to most other medical specialties where the gender gap is less pronounced or absent at both the trainee and consultant levels (1).
- On the 7<sup>th</sup> of March, speaking at the launch of a book, Dr Gabrielle McMullin made the controversial recommendation to female surgical trainees that “if you are approached for sex, probably the safest thing to do in terms of your career is to comply with the request”. Dr McMullin referred to the story of Dr Carolyn Tan, a neurosurgical registrar who won a sexual harassment case against her supervisor while working in Melbourne. Dr Tan was not subsequently employed in any Australian public hospital as a neurosurgeon, while the offender remains in the same job to this day (2,3,4)
- Following Dr McMullin’s controversial comments, a number of female surgeons, some anonymously, have come out with accounts of sexual harassment that were not officially reported. In a number of cases this was due to the fear of the impact that this could have upon their career. (5)

### THE OPINIONS

#### Australian Medical Association (AMA)

- In response to the media attention that the issue of sexual harassment in surgery received, the AMA convened a roundtable discussion to confront this issue head on. Consequently, the AMA is committed to facilitating cultural change within the medical community with the aim of providing safe processes to deal with sexual harassment. (6,7, 8,9)

#### Royal Australasian College of Surgeons (RACS)

- There is a group within RACS that is specifically dedicated to issues affecting women in surgery. (10)
- RACS has commissioned an expert review panel to write a report on occupational violence, including bullying and harassment, which is due to be tabled in May. (11)

#### Australian Medical Students’ Association (AMSA)

- On the 12th March AMSA issued a press release titled ‘sexual misconduct a barrier to ensuring gender equality for future doctors’. AMSA has come out in support of gender equality. According to the AMSA Women in Surgery Representative Maria Bilal, ‘gender should not affect the way in which individuals progress their career – we need to foster a supportive system that allows trainees to thrive without the prospect of harassment’. (12)

### Australian National University

- Professor Nicholas Glasgow (Dean of ANU Medical School) sent a message to all ANU medical students outlining the clear position of the medical school against any form of harassment and bullying. The position of the ANU Medical School is that “Sexism, harassment, homophobia and unfairly harming the career prospects of graduates have no place at the ANU and no place in the practice of medicine.”
- Further information regarding the policies and procedures of the ANU Medical School is available via Wattle. The first port of call for students who have experienced bullying or harassment, including sexual harassment, is the year coordinator or Dean of students.

### HOW YOU CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE

- If you have an opinion on the issue of sexual harassment in the medical workforce
  - Contact the Women in Surgery representative of the ANU Surgical Society
  - Contact AMSA and consider contributing to their policy discussions
  - Join the Medical Women’s Society of the ACT and region
- Medical students form an important voice in promoting cultural change. Be prepared to openly discuss issues of gender equity and sexual harassment in medicine with your medical colleagues and the wider community.
- If you experience bullying or harassment, take appropriate steps to address the incident; if you see bullying or harassment, support your colleagues to find support and address the incident.

### REFERENCES

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