Eradicating Medical Student Mistreatment
A Sisyphean Task

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The Myth of Sisyphus

Eradicating Medical Student Mistreatment: A Longitudinal Study of One Institution’s Efforts
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Abstract

Purpose
Since 1999, the David Geffen School of Medicine at UCLA (DGSOM) has created policies to prevent medical student mistreatment, instituted safe mechanisms for reporting mistreatment, provided resources for discussion and resolution, and educated faculty and residents. In this study, the authors examined the incidence, severity, and sources of perceived mistreatment over the 13-year period during which these measures were implemented.

Method
From 1999 to 2008, medical students at DGSOM completed an anonymous survey after their third-year interview and reported how often they experienced physical, verbal, sexual harassment, ethnic, and power mistreatment, and who committed it. The authors analyzed these data using descriptive statistics and the students’ descriptions of these incidents, qualitatively categorizing them as “mild,” “moderate,” or “severe.” They compared the data across four periods, delineated by medicine institutional measures to eradicate mistreatment.

Results
Of 2,131 eligible students, 1,945 (96%) completed the survey. More than half (1,166/1,945) experienced some form of mistreatment. Verbal and power mistreatment were most common, but 5% of students (106/1,932) reported physical mistreatment. The pattern of incidents categorized as “mild,” “moderate,” or “severe” remained consistent across the four time periods. Students most frequently identified residents and clinical faculty as the source of mistreatment.

Conclusions
Despite a multifaceted approach at DGSOM across a 13-year period to eradicate medical student mistreatment, a persistent aspect of the hidden curriculum may be undermining these efforts. Thus, eliminating mistreatment requires an aggressive approach both locally at the institution level and nationally across institutions.
Well-Being Survey

- Administered end of 3rd-year clerkships
- Responses are anonymous
- Students report:
  - Whether or not they experienced mistreatment
  - Frequency
    - once, twice, multiple occasions
  - Sources of mistreatment
    - pre-clinical faculty, nurse, clinical faculty, resident, student, patient, other
  - Department and institution (optional)
  - Description of experience (optional)

Types of Mistreatment

- Physical
  - Slapped, struck or pushed
- Verbal
  - Yelled or shouted at, called a derogatory name, cursed or ridiculed
- Sexual Harassment
  - Inappropriate physical or verbal advances, intentional neglect, sexual jokes, or mistreatment based on sexual orientation
- Ethnic
  - Intentional neglect, ethnic jokes, comments, and expectations regarding stereotypical behavior
- Power
  - Made to feel intimidated, dehumanized, or had a threat made about a recommendation, grade, or career
UCLA Well-Being Survey
(Students surveyed end of third year)

Have you personally experienced this type of mistreatment in the last year?

Timeline of Our Proactive Approach

- Gender and Power Abuse Committee formed
- Statement on an Abuse-Free Environment
- Medical Sciences OMBUDS Office
- State-Mandated Sexual Harassment Training Course
- Paper on Student Mistreatment
- Policy for Prevention of Student Mistreatment
- Student and Resident Education Program
- Doctoring 3 Module
Analysis of the Severity of Comments

• Reviewed all comments describing mistreatment
• Identified themes
• Coded comments using themes
• Severity rating of mild, moderate or severe assigned to themes
• Severity ratings applied to each comment
Example of Comment & Severity Rating- Power

“On medicine I had to consult surgery but the surgeon refused to speak to me because I was a medical student despite having the most complete knowledge about the patient as the new interns had just started that day.”

Theme:
Neglect/ignored

Mild

Example of Comment & Severity Rating- Ethnic

“Resident said that I'm just like all the other Asian families whose parents never love their kids and give unbelievable amounts of pressure to do well.”

Theme:
Stereotyped

Moderate
Example of Comment & Severity Rating - Physical

“The chief resident sucker-punched me in the stomach to make the other residents laugh.”

**Theme:**
Physically mistreated causing pain or potential injury

**Severe**

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**Have incidents become less severe?**

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- **Mild**
- **Moderate**
- **Severe**
Public and Academic Reaction to Study

- Pauline Chen called attention to our study in a NYT column, “The Bullying Culture of Medical School”

- She praised DGSOM for being a “leader” in instituting reforms

- She received 1,065 comments/responses to her column

- These publications reignited the national dialogue