CONFRONTING BULLYING

Collective action by nurses and other health workers is the key to challenging bullying.

By NZNO educator Susan Stewart

“Nursing is full of workplace bullying and back stabbing – such horizontal violence prevents nursing being a true profession and is the reason I would not recommend it as a career. I love the patients and the work, but the culture is one of horizontal violence.”

Bullying is rife in health and in nursing. NZNO delegates familiar with bullying patterns describe it as a series of unwelcome, insidious incidents that form a pattern of behaviour designed to humiliate the target. Each incident on its own may seem trivial but, when taken together, they cause fear and distress to the victim and their family, and erode workplace morale. The victim’s self-esteem plummet and they often begin to blame themselves. The bully’s motive is often a desire for power and control.

We know that bullying is widespread; it is destructive and it is a complex issue. Our health facilities certainly have cultures that enable this behaviour. Staff report feeling vulnerable in an ever-changing work environment where they are urged to work smarter, which can mean working harder with an inappropriate skill mix. Staff feel weary and have a sense of powerlessness in a hierarchical culture where there are changing leadership styles and/or inconsistent management practices.

How does bullying manifest in workplaces? Bullying behaviour members and delegates have witnessed includes malicious gossiping, belittling colleagues, constant criticism, social isolation, micro-managing, overloading with work, often with menial tasks, setting unattainable goals and withholding information.

Insisting on high standards, offering constructive criticism, issuing reasonable instructions, managing firmly and fairly, and having good natured fun that everyone enjoys is not bullying.

Challenges for staff
The challenges for staff are:
• to identify bullying behaviour in their workplaces and talk openly about it;
• to acknowledge their inaction or unintentional action may have helped foster this culture;
• to respond to situations in a respectful and assertive manner – everybody has rights and responsibilities in their work areas;
• take responsibility, with management, to lead good work practices. These work practices are values-based, thus dignity, trust and respect are demonstrated in collegial relationships; and
• expect accountability from chief executives and line managers, to implement and monitor dignity-at-work policies in a meaningful way.

There are a variety of ways NZNO can help nurses and other health workers meet these challenges. NZNO can request and support education sessions with all staff. These enable learning and reflection on workplace behaviours.

NZNO offers a one-day seminar “Bullying and harassment prevention” to members, and activists are taking the learning from the seminar back into their work areas.

NZNO delegates can lead discussions on promoting a healthy work environment. As a result, in some workplaces members have chosen to say “No” to bullying. This response has been demonstrated with “no-moan zones”, inclusive behaviours, encouraging empathy for fellow staff, welcoming new staff, especially students, and supporting social events which encourage camaraderie.

Where bullying is witnessed, some workplaces now have “red alerts” and group activities that silently support the target. This sends a strong message that bullying is not tolerated. These activities are premised on staff expecting a partnership approach with their employer.

A dignified working environment is one where all employees feel safe; where rigorous debate is encouraged; where fair and open processes are promoted; where everyone’s contribution is valued; and where outcomes reflect professional standards. For such workplaces to flourish requires chief executives and senior management to lead this cultural change with NZNO.

Further, NZNO can honour areas where dignity-at-work practices are in place and encourage replication of this approach.

Individually, NZNO delegates support victims to take back their power and, where appropriate, may encourage an approach to the alleged bully. NZNO encourages victims to take notes of all bullying incidents, complete health and safety incident forms, and gain support and counselling through employer-funded programmes, eg the employee assistance programme.

If the bullying continues, then the complaint process is initiated. Unfortunately, at this late stage, the situation can be irretrievable, with the member psychologically and physically unwell and struggling to return to work. The next step is litigation and while a member may have their day in court, this often only compensates for hurt and humiliation. This process does not address the bullying culture or an individual’s resilience to cope with this situation.

Members need to support each other
To meet the challenges and change the workplace culture, members need to support each other. NZNO has a range of people and strategies to help staff confront bullying behaviour – the leadership of delegates, workplace organising committees, organisers and professional nurse advisers. NZNO has numerous resources including the delegate handbook, articles available through the library, other union resources and educators offering seminar and modules. There is much at stake. The tools to eliminate bullying are available but none of this work can be done in a vacuum – cultural change takes time and vigilance by everybody.

For employers, a strategy to eliminate bullying will be cost effective, as productivity, morale and staff retention improve.

It is time to make a choice – do nothing and watch colleagues fall, or take a stand as a group, to eliminate bullying. Demand dignity at work for your own well-being and to improve your capacity to care for patients/residents.

In conclusion, it is important to acknowledge the courage of NZNO members who have shared their stories through the pages of *Kai Tiaki Nursing New Zealand*, and the collective actions of members who work with dignity and compassion to eliminate bullying.

* I would like to acknowledge the input of NZNO staff in preparing this article.

Reference