every employer should develop a zero-tolerance attitude to bullying and harassment; it can cause immense upset to those involved and particularly to those on the receiving end. In the NHS, the costs associated with bullying and harassment are simply an expense it can ill afford but as the largest employer in England it has a legal and moral duty to protect its staff who are the very back bone of the organisation.

Sickness levels amongst NHS staff have dramatically increased. Levels of sickness absence caused by mental ill-health have more than doubled in the last four years according to figures obtained by the BBC. The data reported, 41,112 NHS staff took sick leave due to anxiety, stress and depression in 2014, which is a dramatic increase from 20,207 in 2010. But whether you work for the NHS or a private company, bullying and harassment can occur anywhere and at any time and persistent bullying can have detrimental effects on the victim. (See the margin for some useful links.)

DEFINING BULLYING AND HARASSMENT

So what is bullying and harassment? What is the official definition? The Equality Act 2010 defines harassment as:

Unwanted conduct related to a relevant protected characteristic (age, disability, race, religion or belief, gender reassignment, sex and sexual orientation), which has the purpose or effect of violating an individual’s dignity or creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment for that individual whether you are the intended target or within earshot of the harassment.2

Bullying is defined as:

Offensive, intimidating, malicious or insulting behaviour, an abuse or misuse of power through means that undermine, humiliate, demeasure or injure the recipient.2

Bullying or harassment is unwarranted and unwelcome treatment of an individual. The perpetrator or perpetrators may be an individual such as someone in a position of authority like a manager or a supervisor or it can sometimes be a group of people. The bullying and or harassment may be obvious or subtle. These are just a few examples of bullying and harassment:

- unfair treatment
- the spreading of malicious rumours
- insulting or ridiculing behaviour
- demeaning someone
- constant criticism
- setting someone up to fail
- exclusion
- victimisation
- unwelcome sexual advances
- invasion of personal space
- inappropriate and unwelcome personal contact
- threats about job security
- undermining competent individuals
- overbearing supervision or management
- misuse of power or position
- the blocking of progress of an individual, including access to training or the prevention of promotion.

Employers and employees should all strive to create a culture where all are treated fairly, respectfully and with courtesy and this should be applied to all forms of professional communication.

Social media and electronic communication can also be used to bully and harass others – so please do use these tools with caution – stop and think about how others will interpret your messages before pressing the send button. More advice on the use of social media can be found in the Social Media Guidelines – see the Professionalism section of the BDA website.

If you think you are being affected by bullying and harassment speak to your local BDA representative as soon as possible, they will support you and point you to the right policies to help you deal with your issue. They will advise and guide you through the process and assist you in resolving the issue. Find out who your local BDA trade union representative is by calling the BDA Trade Union on 0121 200 8021.