

LEADERSHIP PAGE



Zero Tolerance for Sexual Harassment in Cardiology

Moving From #MeToo to #MeNeither

Mary Norine Walsh, MD, FACC, *President, American College of Cardiology*

Cathleen C. Gates, MA, *Interim Chief Executive Officer, American College of Cardiology*

The “#MeToo” movement has galvanized the nation, and the world for that matter, around the breadth and scope of sexual harassment and violence, particularly in the workplace. Countless victims are speaking up, finding strength, and hopefully healing by weaving their individual stories with those of other victims to bring about change and encourage accountability.

Judging by the viral nature of the #MeToo hashtag, a vast number of women, and some men, have witnessed or been affected by harassment or violence of some sort in their lifetimes. However, the perceived or actual consequences of speaking up often outweigh the benefits. Faced with questions about veracity of the claims, the threat of personal injury or injury to loved ones, loss of a job or promotion, public criticism, stigmatism, or the need to relive the event over and over while charges are investigated, many victims choose silence. “For too long, survivors of sexual assault and harassment have been in the shadows. We have been afraid to speak up, to say ‘Me Too’ and to seek justice and accountability. For many the consequences of doing so have been devastating,” said Tarana Burke, founder of the #MeToo movement in a recent statement (1).

The medical field is not immune to these transgressions. Stories of senior clinicians and scientists exploiting their positions of authority to take advantage of younger women colleagues, residents, and fellows have often been shared informally over the years, in

attempts to help others avoid specific transgressors and situations. Reshma Jaggi, MD, DPhil, highlights some of the unreported experiences that were shared with her following the release of data from her study of workplace sexual harassment in medicine, in a recent perspective piece published in the *New England Journal of Medicine*. “[Women] speak of challenging institutional cultures, with workplaces dominated by men who openly engage in lewd ‘locker-room conversation’ or exclude them from all-male social events, leaving them without allies in whom to confide after suffering an indignity or a crime,” she writes (2).

On the cardiology front, a professional life survey conducted by the American College of Cardiology (ACC) and published early last year in *JACC*, showed a large majority of women experienced some form of discrimination in the workplace, with sexual discrimination among the top issues cited (3). Although the survey did not address sexual harassment specifically, it did note a decline in the number of women reporting discrimination between 1996 and 2015 (71% vs. 65%, respectively). However, the authors noted the continued need for improvement. “It is critical that experiences of discrimination be reported and addressed because the perception that discrimination is a rare phenomenon could, ironically, increase stigmatization and discourage reporting,” the authors write (3).

The #MeToo movement and the subsequent removal of Hollywood moguls, entertainers, journalists, members of Congress, and other professions from their jobs are stimulating much-needed discussions of how to break the silence that has largely occurred to date. These discussions are not just happening in public forums,

such as talk shows, magazines like *TIME*, social media platforms, and major events like the Golden Globe Awards. They are occurring in boardrooms, staff meetings, medical staff lounges, and family rooms across the country. They are also happening at the ACC at both the staff and member levels.

As part of the ACC's annual Leadership Forum for new College leaders in late January, participants took part in a 30-min session titled "Me Too, But Now What." The session addressed what ACC leaders need to know about sexual harassment to guarantee an environment that is safe and accountable for College staff and the members and colleagues they interact with as part of their ACC responsibilities.

The ACC's Annual Scientific Session in Orlando, Florida, will bring another opportunity for members to engage in mainstream discussions around what a safe, trustworthy, and accountable culture looks like. The ACC's Women in Cardiology (WIC) Section will be hosting a dedicated session on "Harassment in Cardiology—#MeToo" on Sunday in the WIC Lounge that will include former ACC President and Diversity Task Force Chair Pamela Douglas, MD, MACC; Sharonne Hayes, MD, FACC; Robert Harrington, MD, FACC; and Chet Rihal, MD, FACC. Additionally, the ACC will debut its attendee conduct policy that will in the future be required for all attendees of ACC events. This is a standard that many organizations like ours are adopting.

At Heart House, a town hall with a focus on the College's zero tolerance policy occurred in late 2017, and the ACC is also providing sexual harassment prevention training for all of its staff members over the next 2 months. Ensuring that everyone—members and staff—understands that any form of sexual harassment or violence will not be tolerated or accepted is of paramount importance. Fostering an environment and culture where members and staff, regardless of race, ethnicity, sex and gender, feel safe from any form of harassment is at the core of the College.

Moving from discussion to implementation is the next major step. The ACC's professional life survey encourages the sharing of information and best practices across medical specialties. For example, it highlights the work of the Royal Australian College of Surgeons in researching and developing a detailed

action plan "to end a perceived climate of discrimination, bullying, and sexual harassment, and to improve respect and patient safety" (3). Similarly, the Diversity Task Force made recommendations, approved by the Board of Trustees, which include enhancing the culture within the cardiology profession and the perceptions of the field to be inclusive, professional, equitable, and welcoming.

ACC leaders, including the ACC's Board of Trustees, the Board of Governors, Membership Committee, WIC Section, senior staff, and others, are already working to define and implement best practices, from expanding the existing Professionalism Module to include more sexual harassment content to ensuring the College's sexual harassment policies are as robust as possible. Prime among these policies is that of an "open door" to encourage discussion, report concerns, and ensure that any reports will be dealt with seriously.

The College has a strict ethics policy overseen by its Ethics Committee on behalf of the Board of Trustees. Additionally, among the College's newly revised core values is one specifically encouraging "a culture of trust, respect, and safety with all colleagues, regardless of position or title" (4). Developed collaboratively by both ACC members and staff, the core values define who the College is and what it stands for. We do not have to wait for a final plan to begin to live this core value. Maintaining this culture of trust, respect, and safety requires us to be "all in." If inappropriate or threatening behavior or language is witnessed, a bystander should act or intervene. To steal a line from Homeland Security: "If you see something, say something."

The ACC is the professional home for cardiovascular professionals around the globe. Your home should be a place where you are safe and respected. Anything less will not be tolerated. This is our commitment to all ACC members and to ACC staff. We will have succeeded when we can move from #MeToo to #MeNeither.

ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE: Mary Norine Walsh, MD, FACC, American College of Cardiology, 2400 N Street NW, Washington, DC 20037. E-mail: president@acc.org.

REFERENCES

- Burke T. #MeToo Movement. Available at: <https://metoomvmt.org>. Accessed January 23, 2018.
- Jagsi R. Sexual Harassment in Medicine—#MeToo. *N Engl J Med* 2018;378:209-11.
- Lewis S, Mehta L, Douglas P, et al. Changes in the professional lives of cardiologists over 2 decades. *J Am Coll Cardiol* 2017;69:452-62.
- American College of Cardiology. ACC Core Values. Available at: <http://www.acc.org/about-acc>. Accessed January 31, 2018.