Talking Ethics

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The Canadian Human Rights Commission, established in 1977, aims to ensure that everyone in Canada is treated fairly, no matter who they are. According to the commission, harassment is a form of discrimination that comprises unwelcome remarks, jokes, threats or intimidation based on your race, religion, sex, age, disability. Any unwelcome physical contact, such as touching, pinching, is also considered harassment.

The recent CDHA Healthy and Respectful Workplace Survey (2018) defined workplace harassment as a single or repeated incident of objectionable behaviour that offends, humiliates or degrades a particular person or group. Objectionable behaviour may take the form of insults, rudeness or embarrassing or demeaning behaviour by personnel in the workplace. In the dental industry, workplace personnel includes co-workers, such as dental associates, dental hygienists, and dental assistants; supervisors; office managers; dentists and their spouses/partners; and the clients and their appointed representatives.

What constitutes harassment in the workplace? The Canadian Human Rights Commissions offers several clear examples on its website:

➤ A colleague repeatedly makes fun of your hijab

➤ A manager regularly makes inappropriate comments about your physical appearance

➤ An employee threatens your safety following a heated discussion

➤ A supervisor rubs your shoulders despite your repeated objections?

Harassment is not limited to verbal encounters. Nonverbal gestures, body movements, facial expressions, and eye contact can intimidate in the workplace. Written communication in various forms, including texting, tweeting, emails, and social media posts; telecommunications; and the internet can be utilized in the workplace to offend, humiliate or degrade a particular person or group.
Ethically speaking, in the workplace dental hygienists are guided by the principle of integrity, specifically:

Dental hygienists promote conditions that enable social, economic, cultural values and institutions compatible with meeting basic human rights and dignity.

Dental hygienists promote workplace practices and policies that facilitate professional practice in accordance with the principles, standards, laws and regulations under which they are accountable.4

In Canada your human rights include the right to equality and dignity, and to live free from all forms of discrimination (including harassment). These rights are protected by provincial, territorial, federal, and international laws.1 Yet in the past year, 35% of the 3,780 respondents to CDHA’s Healthy and Respectful Workplace Survey have experienced some form of harassment, bullying, abuse and/or violence on an occasional, repeated or constant basis from employers, colleagues, and clients in the workplace.³

In the workplace what should you do in response to witnessing or experiencing objectionable behaviour? First, educate yourself. Use the resources available through CDHA. For example, the Canadian Journal of Dental Hygiene online index allows you to search for relevant research by topic, keyword, author or date of publication and download articles free of charge.⁵ CDHA members also have access to Homewood Health’s Member & Family Assistance Program, which provides counselling services and a host of online resources. Visit www.cdha.ca/homewood for more information.

Second, since moral behaviour, values, and standards differ between cultures, dental hygienists should strive to become culturally competent or culturally aware of behavioural differences. Cultures differ substantially in their use of proxemics (personal space)⁶ and kinesics (gestures, body movements, facial expressions, and eye contact).⁶

Third, the guidelines for ethical decision making in CDHA's code of ethics for dental hygienists is another valuable resource.⁴ Steps in the guidelines include gathering the relevant factual information about the situation; identifying options for actions that could resolve the issue; assessing the options by determining the pros and cons; implement the chosen action; and evaluating the outcome(s).

Over the coming months, CDHA will be developing a set of tools and resources that will be available to members to support and reinforce a healthy and respectful workplace.⁴ Watch for details and announcements in this magazine and in CDHA's eNewsletter.

Know your rights. If you believe you have experienced discrimination, you may be able to file a complaint with the Canadian Human Rights Commission.⁷ Most importantly, share your knowledge. Forty-one percent of the 3,780 survey respondents have observed others in the workplace being mistreated by co-workers.³ As ethical health care professionals you have a duty to improve the well-being of others. You have also accepted the ethical responsibility of being beneficent, accountable, and socially just.

References