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MEDIA RELEASE

Junior doctors, hospital doctors and international graduates attract more aggression

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Junior doctors, hospital-based doctors and international medical graduates (IMGs) working in general practice attract the most aggression from patients, according to a study published in the 17 September issue of the *Medical Journal of Australia*.

The study by Mr Danny Hills, a doctoral scholar at the department of epidemiology and preventive medicine at Monash University, and coauthors surveyed 9449 doctors between March 2010 and June 2011 in the third wave of the Medicine in Australia: Balancing Employment and Life survey.

The survey aimed to determine how often doctors were subject to verbal or written and physical aggression from patients, patients' families and carers, colleagues, and other people external to the workplace.

Overall, 70.6% of doctors experienced verbal or written aggression and just under a third (32.3%) experienced physical aggression from one or more sources in the previous 12 months.

Patients were the most common source of aggression, followed by their relatives or carers, and coworkers were the third most common source of aggression, the authors found.

“Of particular importance is the finding that workplace aggression prevalence for the primarily hospital-based, younger and less experienced hospital non-specialists and specialists in training was up to twice that for GPs or specialists”, they wrote.

A higher proportion of IMGs (63.1%) reported aggression from patients, compared with 52.3% of non-IMGs.

They also found that female GPs experienced significantly less aggression from patients and their relatives and carers than their male counterparts. However, female specialists in training reported more verbal, written and physical aggression from patients and their relatives and carers than their male counterparts.

There were some other surprising findings. At 23.4%, the proportion of GPs and GP registrars reporting physical aggression from patients was far higher than in previous studies. Also, prevalence rates for coworker aggression were much higher than those reported by United Kingdom clinicians.

According to the authors, the results of their study indicated that “workplace aggression in medicine is a significant professional, occupational safety and public health issue”. Previous research has shown that doctors exposed to aggression report a loss of confidence or enthusiasm for treating patients, and increased medical errors.

“Clearly, greater institutional efforts are required to enhance the aggression minimisation skills of doctors who are new to clinical practice, and to reduce both the prevalence and impact of workplace aggression”, they wrote.

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