

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

**Reply to: There's No Place for "Sticks and Stones" in Vascular Surgery**

In their letter, Files and Freischlag, who have published extensively on similar issues, present potential reasons for bullying in vascular surgery.<sup>1</sup> Importantly, they also offer actions for redress.

Our national societies are addressing this problem publicly. However, whilst they may be wringing collective hands and outwardly tackling the problem, the change must start at a personal level. The stumbling block here is that individuals may not recognise their own problematic behaviours. So is there a role for behavioural screening or psychometric testing of surgeons to identify toxic traits that can be targeted with training or re-education? Or, at least, to make everyone aware of their potentially damaging behaviours? Without detection of this endemic disease, treatment cannot be initiated.

And then there is the argument of; what is one person's banter is another person's bullying. When words become weapons, who decides which is which? Differences in cultural and religious beliefs, language barriers, and neurodivergence are only some of the reasons why behaviour may be interpreted differently from how it was intended. We have to presume, or hope, that most vascular surgeons are NOT premeditated bullies, and so we must all actively recognise destructive behaviours in ourselves.

There are also issues of institutional bullying and suppression of whistleblowers. This is a particularly pertinent theme in the UK at this moment, with the Lucy Letby murder trial highlighting what appears to be unconscionable repression of senior doctors' now vindicated concerns that this nurse was murdering babies. They were dismissed, nay, aggressively gaslighted, by senior managers protecting their hospital's reputation.<sup>2</sup> Is it any wonder that we find it difficult to report inappropriate behaviour? In our survey, hospital managers or administrators were perpetrators in 11% of cases.<sup>3</sup>

We<sup>3</sup>, and others<sup>4,5</sup>, tell a story that most of us know to be true. We certainly do not have all the answers, but perhaps the first questions all of us should ask are these: "Am I a bully?" and "How can I avoid being a bully?"

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