

Special Article

The Duty to Lead by Example

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In the wake of the allegations against Harvey Weinstein and on the crest of the #MeToo movement, the AAGL has taken the initiative to examine our policies and expectations surrounding harassment, diversity, inclusion, and incident reporting. This progress was prompted in part by a letter received by the AAGL Board of Directors from a group of members outlining concerns regarding gender equality in our organization. The Board immediately responded by creating a Task Force on Anti-Harassment, Diversity, and Incident Reporting to review and revise AAGL's existing policies in order to be proactive and create a safe, productive, and inspiring environment for our members.

Sexual harassment has been recognized as a form of sex discrimination in the United States since the 1970s. The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission defined sexual harassment as unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature when submission to such conduct is made either explicitly or implicitly as a condition of an individual's employment, submission to or rejection of such conduct by an individual

is used as the basis for employment decisions affecting such individuals, or such conduct has the purpose or effect of unreasonably interfering with an individual's performance or creating an intimidating, hostile, or offensive environment [1]. This definition can apply to same-sex sexual interactions as well.

Sexual harassment has been normalized in our society. Over half of women have been reported to have experienced some form of sexual harassment with even higher percentages in women age 16–24. Nearly 25% of women have been touched without invitation. Almost half of respondents in one study had been warned about sexual advances that might occur from certain co-workers at the onset of a job [2,3].

Is the medical profession immune? Recent experience suggests the answer is no. A recently published article in the *New England Journal of Medicine* reveals similar numbers within the medical profession, with 30% of women reporting sexual harassment [4]. Sadly, some such incidents have been reported within medical environments and it is highly likely that more incidents remain unreported, allowing such behavior to continue.

In a society dedicated to the care of women, it is our duty and our privilege to do better than this. As a member society, the AAGL has the opportunity - indeed, the duty - to lead the field of medicine by example. In addition to sexual harassment, the AAGL recognized the need to provide guidance and set expectations regarding all types of harassment, diversity, inclusion, and incident reporting.

This Task Force, with the assistance of the AAGL staff and outside expert consultants, have drafted several important policies which have been approved by the AAGL Board of Directors and will be implemented immediately. These policies are based on the Task Force's vision of an optimal member organization and have been drafted following an extensive review of bylaws and policies adopted by other medical societies and with input from consultants with expertise in sexual harassment law to reflect best practices. A review of available policies outside of the AAGL revealed a dearth of guidance within medical societies, allowing the AAGL to be at the forefront of this societal improvement.

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Available at www.sciencedirect.com and www.jmig.org

These policies can be found at: <https://www.aagl.org/anti-harassment/> and are included in [Appendix A](#). The highlights are as follows:

1. The Anti-Harassment Policy: It is the policy of the AAGL to provide an environment free from all forms of discrimination, harassment, and retaliation to its members and guests at all regional educational meetings or courses, the annual global congress (i.e. annual meeting), and AAGL-hosted social events (AAGL sponsored activities). This policy defines harassment, sexual harassment, and discrimination in clear terms. All AAGL members, guests, and industry partners are expected to abide by this policy during all AAGL sponsored activities. A Grievance Committee will be newly formed to investigate and adjudicate any complaints made under this policy. The AAGL encourages reporting of all perceived incidents of harassment, discrimination, or retaliation. Three options have been put into place for such reporting, including email or phone call to the Executive Director, email to the Grievance Committee (see below), and by phone to the AAGL 866 number during the AAGL Annual Global Congress (i.e. annual meeting) and regional educational meetings or courses. An investigation process and disciplinary actions have been codified, in which the Grievance Committee will perform an investigation of the complaint, will have the opportunity to seek input from appropriate legal counsel, and will make recommendations to the Board of Directors. Any adverse action will require approval of the AAGL Board of Directors, and may include warnings, reprimands, requirement for training, loss of a leadership position, or expulsion from the AAGL. In order to avoid bias, the identities of the parties involved will remain anonymous until the Board makes its recommendations. A process for appeal is also outlined. Retaliation is prohibited.
2. The Inclusion and Diversity Policy makes it clear that the AAGL promotes an environment of respect, fairness, integrity, and inclusiveness in all its activities.
3. The Grievance Policy outlines the structure and function of the Grievance Committee. A Grievance Committee will be formed to investigate and adjudicate any complaints made under the AAGL Anti-Harassment Policy. The AAGL Grievance Committee Policy addresses the formation, membership, qualifications, and conduct of this committee.

The Task Force has also implemented requirements for leaders in the organization. Each incoming leader of the AAGL, to include members of the Board of Directors, members of the Scientific Program Committee, and incoming members of the FMIGS Board of Directors, will be required to undergo sexual harassment and sensitivity training prior to initiating their responsibilities. The current Board of Directors will set the standard by undergoing this training prior to the first in-person Board meeting in February 2018.

The AAGL is committed to be the premier organization caring for women through gynecologic surgery. We vow to be the organizational role model at the forefront of Anti-Harassment, Diversity, and Inclusion. Our policies and procedures set the stage for our membership to enjoy a continually safe, productive, and collaborative experience at all AAGL sponsored activities. These expectations allow each individual in the AAGL to fulfill their duty to lead by example.

The members of the Task Force on Anti-Harassment, Diversity, and Incident Reporting were Jubilee Brown (Chair), Ted Anderson, Linda Bradley, Barbara Levy, Shanti Mohling, Jessica Shepherd, Matt Siedhoff, and JD Villegas. Linda Michels and Frank Loffer were monitors and Colleen Lovret and Seth Spirrisson staffed the Task Force and did extensive background research drafting these policies.

References

1. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. 29 C.F.R. § 1604.11 [1980].
2. Trades Union Congress and the Everyday Sexism Project. Nearly two in three young women have experienced sexual harassment at work, TUC survey reveals. Available at: <https://www.tuc.org.uk/news/nearly-two-three-young-women-have-experienced-sexual-harassment-work-tuc-survey-reveals>. Accessed February 7, 2018.
3. Slater + Gordon Lawyers. Sexual Harassment Rife in the Workplace: New Study Reveals. Available at: <https://www.slatergordon.co.uk/media-centre/press-releases/2013/10/sexual-harassment-rife-in-the-workplace-new-study-reveals/>. Accessed February 7, 2018.
4. Jaggi R. Perspective: sexual harassment in medicine - #MeToo. *N Engl J Med*. 2018;378:209–211.

Appendix A

Anti-Harassment Policy

Approved by the AAGL Board of Directors on February 8, 2018; Effective February 12, 2018.

Introduction

AAGL encourages its members to interact with each other for the purposes of professional development and scholarly interchange so that all members may learn, network, and enjoy the company of colleagues in a professional atmosphere. Consequently, it is the policy of the AAGL to provide an environment free from all forms of discrimination, harassment, and retaliation to its members, and guests at all regional educational meetings or courses, the annual global congress (i.e. annual meeting), and AAGL-hosted social events (AAGL sponsored activities). Every individual associated with the AAGL has a duty to maintain this environment free of harassment and intimidation.

Harassment, discrimination, or creation of a hostile environment based on personal attributes, including but not limited to race, color, national origin, sexual orientation, gender identity, religion, age, sex, physical or mental disability, marital status, pregnancy, veteran status, or any other classification protected by law, is inconsistent with the ideals and principles

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