Combating racism in the NHS

Essential facts
Black and minority ethnic (BME) nurses working in health are still treated unequally compared with their white colleagues.

The promotion prospects of the 250,000 BME workers in the 1.4 million-strong NHS workforce are often held back by racism, according to Unite.

Toolkit
Unite has developed a toolkit to help nurses and other staff tackle racial discrimination in health.

Called Race Ahead in Health, the toolkit sets out steps to:
- Tackle the pay gap for BME nurses.
- Reduce bias during selection and recruitment processes.
- Gain equal access to continuing professional development.
- Deal with racial harassment and bullying.

The toolkit also covers fairness for BME women working in health who can face double discrimination due to their gender and race.

Data from the NHS Workforce Race Equality Standard (WRES), which was introduced in England in 2015, show that more BME staff in the NHS are harassed, bullied or abused by colleagues than white counterparts.

In total, 75% of all acute trusts reported a higher percentage of BME staff being harassed, bullied or abused by fellow staff.

In 86% of acute trusts, a higher percentage of BME staff do not believe their employers offer equal opportunities for career progression.

More BME mental health staff say they are abused by members of the public than white staff.

Link
Evidence suggests there is a link between a diverse workforce in which all staff members’ contributions are valued and good patient care.

The greater the proportion of staff from a BME background who reported discrimination at work in the previous 12 months, the lower the levels of patient satisfaction.

Roger Kline’s 2014 research, The Snowy White Peaks of the NHS, suggests that few BME staff were in the most senior NHS positions and their number had declined from five years previously.

Implications for practice
Unite says that many nurses do not know that the WRES has started, but they can find out about the WRES and see how their employers fared in the indicators measured.

Staff can also take up opportunities for training to tackle bias and discrimination in the workplace.

All colleagues who think they are being harassed, discriminated against, or bullied should keep a diary of all incidents recording what happened, when and who was there.

Unite recommends staff contact their union rep as soon as possible and decide what action they want to take. They should take their union reps with them to meetings for support and representation.

Staff should also be aware of the three month time limit for legal cases (six months in Northern Ireland).

Find out more
Race Ahead in Health: Unite’s tackling race discrimination in the workplace toolkit.
tinyurl.com/htnsq3t
NHS Workforce Race Equality Standards.
tinyurl.com/hkvl55a
The Snowy White peaks of the NHS.
tinyurl.com/gph86gs
RCNi article
Workforce Equality: Raising the Standard (Nursing Standard, April 2015)
doi:abs/10.7748/nz.29.31.18.s21

FIND OUT MORE

Expert comment
Obi Amadi
Unite lead professional officer for strategy, policy and equalities

‘This toolkit is a refresh of the issues of racism and inequality, and is designed to help nurses and other healthcare professionals deal with these issues more confidently and competently.

‘Racial discrimination in the NHS is difficult to change. People say that they don’t see racism where they work, and it can be subtle and hard to spot.

‘While BME nursing and midwifery staff are well represented at bands 5 and 6, few make it to the most senior band 9 jobs. This is partly because people like to recruit colleagues who look like them and, as senior managers tend to be white, they are less likely to recruit BME nurses.

‘All healthcare staff should know about the NHS Workforce race equality standards and the nine indicators that all employers should meet.’