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Report reveals concern at “bullying” behaviour among GP representatives

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“Rude, bullying and disrespectful” behaviour is potentially contributing to the marginalisation of women, ethnic minorities, and other minority voices in national and local GP committees, a report from a QC has warned.

The independent review of GP representation in the UK by Ijeoma Omambala QC¹ was commissioned by the GP Defence Fund in response to a motion passed at last year’s annual UK conference of local medical committees (LMCs). The review, published this week, examined representation within the BMA’s General Practitioners Committee (GPC) for the UK and the four national GPCs, as well as their relations with LMCs.

The report, which surveyed and interviewed committee members, highlighted the “sometimes abusive, disrespectful and/or unpleasant language used by some GPs to speak to one another” on the BMA’s online ListServers, which are a common means of communication for LMCs and GPC members.

It noted that this was previously highlighted in the 2019 Romney report,² which had highlighted a discriminatory culture in the committee in which women were undermined, bullied, and in some instances sexually harassed.

“Rude, bullying and disrespectful communication on the ListServers clearly acts as a disincentive to participation in LMCs in general,” the report said. “In addition, it has the potential to contribute to the marginalisation of women, [ethnic minority,] and other minority voices within LMCs and GPCs.”

“Feeling of disconnect”

The report noted that GPs in England, Wales, and Scotland believed that their representation could be improved but that those in Wales and Scotland were generally more positive about the arrangements in place.

Some respondents suggested a need to look at equality and diversity in national and UK committees. In relation to GPC England, specific comments included that there was “a gender bias towards men” and that “young women are seen to be encouraged but do not get anywhere.”

The review also reported a “strong feeling of disconnect” between LMCs and GPC England specifically, with a feeling among grassroots GPs that motions passed at the annual LMC conference were not taken forward sufficiently. The view that “many GPC representatives simply ‘represent themselves’ and their own interests rather than those of their LMCs” emerged from interviews and survey responses.

Contributors to the review also spoke of a feeling that elections to GPC England are run by an “old boys’ network,” with many seats on the committee viewed as “belonging” to a particular individual. “The result is that representatives are less diverse and fail to reflect the demographics of the profession and their supposed constituencies,” the report added.

Issues were also raised around communication between the GPC England executive team and the committee, with the executive team accused of being too “secretive,” as well as concerns about the representation of sessional GPs.

Phil White, chair of the BMA’s GPC for the UK, said, “We take extremely seriously any allegations of bullying or reports of bad behaviour, and have an independent process in place to investigate such occurrences.

“In recent years we have made great strides in representation and made considerable progress since the 2019 Romney review, including the introduction of training for members and staff and activities to improve culture. Across the BMA we have increased the representation of ethnic minorities, women, and other groups but still have more to do.”

He said that the GPC and the wider BMA were constantly seeking to learn and improve how they worked and that the latest report would inform this.

“GPC is dedicated to representing, defending, and advocating for all GPs, whatever their background,” said White.

A new national body?

The report was discussed by representatives at the 2022 UK annual LMC conference held in York on 11 May, during a debate over whether a new national association of LMCs was required to respond to some of the problems raised.

Attendees were generally supportive of a new organisation being set up to support LMCs in England, but they were against such a new organisation taking over the GPC’s functions of national policy and contract negotiations.

Clare Sieber of West Sussex LMC, who argued in favour of change, said, “I believe we need a new representative body. This just isn’t working. The GPC is not representing our needs.”

But the former GPC chair Laurence Buckman and the longstanding GPC member Fay Wilson were applauded after they defended the role of national GPC negotiators and urged GPs to stick with one negotiating body.

Buckman told the conference, “You have to be realistic about what you can achieve. An LMC organisation that represents its colleagues and supports LMCs is not the same as saying your negotiators can’t do their job properly. You need proper representation in a single body.”

- 1 Omambala I. Independent Review of the current representative structure of General Practitioners in the UK. 6 May 2022. <https://www.gpdf.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/GPDF-IOQC-Report-Final-070522.pdf>
- 2 Patterson C. Report into sexism at the BMA published. BMA. 17 Oct 2019. <https://www.bma.org.uk/news-and-opinion/report-into-sexism-at-the-bma-published>