

POSITION STATEMENT

Bullying and Incivility in Midwifery

The American College of Nurse-Midwives (ACNM) Code of Ethics describes moral obligations that guide the behaviors of midwives and individuals representing the profession of midwifery, including members of the ACNM.¹ Accordingly, midwives will in all aspects of professional relationships:

- Respect basic human rights and the dignity of all persons
- Respect their own self-worth, dignity, and professional integrity
- Act without discrimination based on factors such as age, gender, race, ethnicity, religion, lifestyle, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, disability, or nature of the health problem
- Promote, advocate for, and strive to protect the rights, health, and well-being of women, families, and communities¹

In contrast to these professional values and behaviors, workplace violence or bullying is considered to be mistreatment by one or more perpetrators that can include verbal abuse, threatening, intimidating or humiliating language, or sabotaging behaviors that interfere with work.^{2,3} Unfortunately, bullying and incivility are common in health care settings⁴ and in health care education,⁵ including in midwifery⁶ and midwifery education.^{7,8} Bullying, mistreatment, and other incivilities are significant barriers to respectful workplace, learning, and clinical environments for midwives, students, and patients.

Background

Bullying is defined as deliberate, aggressive, and intentional behavior that intimidates, harasses, victimizes, or abuses others who perceive these acts to be hostile.² Although definitions vary, incivilities have been defined as negative behaviors that are insulting or that violate behavioral norms in the work place⁹ and are also considered to be abusive, disruptive, and aggressive to persons who are targeted.¹⁰ Aggressive behaviors may be 1) verbal, such as name-calling, spreading rumors, or ridicule; 2) physical, such as refusing to provide assistance, shoving or physical assault; or 3) relational, such as social exclusion or undermining the authority of the victim to others. Bullying is prevalent in midwifery and medicine^{5,11,12} and research has shown that bullying in healthcare settings has a deleterious effect on patient safety.^{3,6} Victims of bullying may be those with less experience or familiarity with the practice environment, and experiencing bullying may contribute to midwives leaving the profession.¹³ Additionally, sometimes people in positions of authority may be unwilling to define behaviors as bullying when the perpetrator is viewed as one who plays a powerful clinical role.¹³ Workers who are bullied frequently suffer from mental and physical disorders attributed to the stress incurred by the bullying.¹⁴ In turn, bullying has been found to cause a high turnover of staff as people leave

to escape a hostile work environment.¹⁵ One integrative review reported that individual work experiences, such as experiencing or witnessing bullying or experiencing other abusive or violent behavior at work resulted in nurses considering leaving the profession altogether.¹⁵

Additionally, studies have reported that over half of midwifery students experienced mistreatment or bullying while learning in clinical settings.^{8,16} Bullying behaviors may be motivated by a desire to improve the performance of the student or new midwife but often has the opposite effect of causing the victim to feel humiliated, undermined, or less willing to ask questions or seek support, which ultimately may affect patient safety.¹³ In a survey of student midwives in the United Kingdom, researchers found that half of those surveyed had either witnessed or experienced bullying, and that most often the perpetrator was a midwife or other mentor.¹⁶ Midwifery students in clinical settings have reported mistreatment to have caused them feelings of frustration, anger, and shame.⁸ Further, students reported that experiences of bullying and other forms of mistreatment also caused them to consider abandoning academic programs and the profession of midwifery altogether.⁸ Accordingly, ACNM specifically encourages midwives who precept, hold faculty positions, or are midwifery service directors to be particularly aware that students and new midwives are frequent targets of bullying.^{8,16,17} ACNM recognizes the critical importance of protecting and nurturing students and new midwives during these foundational moments on their professional journeys so that they may learn and practice with both confidence and well-being.

Finally, the American Nurses Association has recognized the serious impact of bullying within the healthcare environment in their position statement Incivility, Bullying, and Workplace Violence.³ Described is the need for respect among colleagues and employers, including the importance of creating workplaces without bullying and incivility and the promotion of physical and psychological wellness.³ The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists Committee on Patient Safety and Quality Improvement published a committee opinion, Behavior that Undermines a Culture of Safety, in which they state that intimidating and disruptive behaviors are unprofessional and should not be tolerated.¹⁸

Given that bullying behaviors are inconsistent with ACNM's Code of Ethics and threaten the wellbeing of patients, midwives, midwifery students, the profession of midwifery, and ACNM, all midwives are expected to:

- Recognize and confront bullying in a professional manner when it occurs
- Never condone or excuse bullying, mistreatment, or incivility in any of its forms, regardless of who is perpetrating the bullying
- Speak out for victims of bullying when it is witnessed, remembering that advocacy for the wellbeing of others is the essence of midwifery

In summary, ACNM supports a zero-tolerance policy toward bullying of midwives, other healthcare professionals, students, or patients. Currently, there is little data on the experiences of bullying, specifically among midwives in the United States. Research in this area is needed to understand this phenomenon and to develop effective educational programs to prevent,

reduce, and address bullying behaviors experienced by midwives, midwifery students, and patients from within and outside of the profession.

References

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Note: Midwifery as used throughout this document refers to the education and practice of certified nurse-midwives (CNMs) and certified midwives (CMs) who have been certified by the American Midwifery Certification Board, Inc. (AMCB).

*Source: Bullying and Incivility in Midwifery Task Force, Clinical Standards and Documents
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