



Royal Australasian

College of Surgeons

Let's operate with respect

Building Respect,
Improving Patient Safety

**2023
Progress
Report**



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College of Surgeons

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Further information

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Committed to Indigenous health

Service | Integrity | Respect | Compassion | Collaboration

Message from the President and Vice President

Context is everything and 2023 was a watershed year for RACS.

Our long-term work to build a culture of respect slowed in 2023 but did not halt as we squared up to financial challenges and introduced interim, modernised governance structures to position us for the future.

Accordingly, this 2023 Progress Report is briefer than in past years. We are pleased to share what has been achieved and restate our commitment to positive cultural change.

Highlights for the 2023 year include RACS' adoption of new gender targets and development of a policy framework for our work to address and eliminate racism in surgery.

Our early efforts to build a culture of respect have given the College a robust platform for our ongoing work. We have learned much in the last seven years, and our insights continue to shape and inform our next steps.

In general, surgeons are action-oriented people, and it is challenging for many of us to accept cultural change takes time. It is difficult for us to change our behaviour and collective behaviour change is harder still, as it requires us to be open to new ways of working and interacting that can challenge deeply held beliefs.

RACS' program of work to build respect in surgery is designed to achieve sustained behaviour change across every level: individual, team, profession. We remain committed to implementing the *2022 Action Plan: Building Respect, Improving Patient Safety*, which sets out the next phases of our work. The plan has three primary areas of focus: Cultural Change and Leadership, Surgical Education, and Feedback and Complaints.

The next phase of our work will aim to convert awareness of the impact of unprofessional conduct on patient safety, into action to prevent it.

RACS' commitment to positive cultural change in surgery in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand is now flanked by wider efforts to build respect in medicine and healthcare more broadly.

Collaboration across the health sector remains key to effective and sustained cultural change.

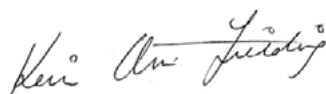
RACS remains a leader on this front. Other specialist medical colleges have embarked on a similar journey to improve the culture of medicine, and many of them are referencing RACS' experience and expertise.

We note the establishment of the *A Better Culture* project, funded by the Commonwealth Department of Health and hosted by the Royal Australasian College of Medical Administrators (RACMA). We share the goal of improving culture in healthcare through long term, positive change.

Within surgery, we are working with our specialty society partners and Speciality training committees/boards to maximise the impact of our efforts by strengthening our collaborative work to build a surgical culture of respect.

Results of the annual national survey of medical Trainees – the Medical Training Survey (MTS), conducted by the Medical Board of Australia – consistently reveal an urgent need for cultural change across the sector, including in surgery.

RACS will use MTS results to galvanise our work. Striving towards a culture of respect in surgery should be our legacy to current and future Trainees.



Associate Professor Kerin Fielding
President



Professor Owen Ung
Vice President

2022 Action Plan: Building Respect, Improving Patient Safety Pillars and Goals

Cultural change and leadership

1. Enrich the culture of surgery through professionalism, respect and civility, applied in all professional roles, including within the College.
2. Advance system-wide cultural change by strengthening relationships of trust, confidence and cooperation with employers, medical colleges, governments and their agencies.
3. Foster cultural safety and diversity, striving for gender equity and the identification and elimination of racism and other forms of discrimination.
4. Develop and apply compassionate and collaborative leadership in surgery consistent with RACS values, to advance culture change.
5. Contemporise RACS governance.

Surgical education

6. Build and consolidate professionalism and civility and embed a culture of respect and collaboration in surgical education.
7. Improve the capability and effectiveness of all surgeons involved in surgical education and training, through a continued focus on professionalism, civility and respect.

Accountability and complaints management

8. Normalise constructive feedback and speaking up as cornerstones of continuous improvement, to help build a culture of respect.
9. Build trust and confidence in RACS revised complaints and feedback process for end stage issue resolution.

Pillar 1: Cultural Change and Leadership

The momentum generated in past years powered our work to strengthen cultural change and leadership in 2023.

Gender diversity

For the wellbeing of surgeons and the safety of our patients, it is crucial to increase diversity in surgery and foster inclusive workplaces. Our efforts continue to strengthen the profession and ensure it more closely reflects the communities we serve.

RACS' Building Respect Action Plan 2022 includes a specific, re-energised focus on actions to support gender diversity and other diversity dimensions and foster inclusion in surgery.

Refreshed 2027 gender equity targets endorsed by RACS council in 2023, aim for a 40:40:20 gender mix in our profession. The targets apply across both our primary areas of focus and aim to get more women SET Trainees and more women in RACS leadership roles, including on RACS Council, RACS major committees and more widely across the college.

By 2027, we want to see 40 per cent of Trainees selected to be women, 40 per cent to be men, and 20 per cent to be any gender. The same targets apply to the representation of women in college leadership roles. The targets take into account that fewer women are available for appointment to college roles, a situation likely to continue for the foreseeable future.

The refreshed targets are compatible with the 50 per cent selection target proposed by Women In Surgery, by capping the total selection at 60 per cent for either men or women.

SET data from 2023 show that the proportion of females applying to SET rose from 32% in 2022 to 34% in 2023, with the proportion accepted into SET increasing from 31% in 2022 to 39% in 2023. This is an increase compared with previous years and is close to meeting the gender diversity target of 40%.

There is considerable variability in female application and acceptance rates and in the representation of females between specialties. Four specialties selected a higher proportion of females than applied for training, and four specialties selected a lower proportion.

2023 data show that the proportion of females on Council and on most RACS major committees is progressing in line with the target of 40% set for 2023-2027. Increasing female participation on some groups remains a challenge, for example the Court of Examiners, the NT and Tasmanian Committees.

RACS encourages the adoption of specialty-specific targets, to help the college community reach profession-wide targets. Progress will be monitored through annual reporting, including on actions taken to change the gender status quo.



As well in 2023:

- RACS was proud to expand the scope of safety initiatives to address additional diversity dimensions, including sexual orientation. RACS was among the 14 medical colleges who participated in Sydney World Pride 2023 and supported the inaugural Pride in Medicine and Surgery float at the Mardi Gras parade. RACS hosted a pre-parade breakfast for all the medical colleges at the Sydney office which was well attended.
- RACS hosted a Women in Leadership webinar series. The interactive webinars aim to develop leadership skills in women, supporting the appointment of female surgeons in leadership roles within RACS.

Flexible Training

Participation in flexible (part time) training in surgery dipped in 2023. While the number of surgical trainees was stable between 2022 and 2023, there was a 27% drop in the number of part-time trainees. Of the 1,269 surgical trainees in 2023, 19 were in part time training and 14 of these were women. There were no part time surgical trainees in New Zealand in 2023. The distribution of part-time surgical trainees in Australia varied between states and territories and across surgical specialities. Trainee data from the Australian Orthopaedic

Association is not included in these data.

Equity in surgery

Historically, RACS' surgeons have not fully represented the gender or the diverse Indigenous and ethnic composition of our community and have not served communities outside metropolitan areas well. Through our commitment to building respect in surgery, RACS has been working on improving gender equity in all surgical specialties. The College openly acknowledges LBGQTQIA+ representation in our surgical workforce and societies and prioritises equitable services to all communities regardless of their demographics.

Actions during the year to support equity in surgery include:

- The theme of RACS' 2023 Annual Scientific Congress was "Equity in Surgery". This is aligned with the College's 2022 – 2024 Strategic Plan and reflects its overarching goal of building a culture of respect and the priority, *'Serving all Communities Equitably'*.
- College-wide advocacy continued to support professionalism and building respect initiatives in regional areas. RACS has supported the pending publication of research study *"Perceptions of barriers and incentives to uptake of consultant positions in regional areas in Aotearoa New Zealand"*, led

by Dr Nicola Hill (RACS Councillor and AoNZNC Representative to the Rural Health Equity Steering Group).

- The Women in Surgery (WIS) Section Strategic Plan 2022-2026 continued to guide work during the year. Actions completed in 2023 included the appointment of a Women in Surgery representative on the Building Respect, Improving Patient Safety (BRIPS) working group; past winners of the WIS essay competition using their platform to advocate for women in surgical roles; and collection and analysis of data on the availability and utilization of flexible training options.

Cultural competence and cultural safety

Cultural diversity in the surgical profession strengthens collective cultural competence and fosters cultural safety for people from diverse backgrounds who in the past have been less visible in surgery. It increases and improves services to under-served populations and helps ensure surgeons who are overseas trained, First Nations and other people of colour, feel part of the RACS community and able to contribute fully and safely.

Cultural diversity improves the health workforce by enriching teams' cognitive diversity. This supports better problem solving, decision

making, innovation and bias and blind spot mitigation. It helps everyone reach their full potential.

RACS 10th Surgical Competency – Cultural competence and cultural safety – focuses on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and Māori groups. It is a reference point in our ongoing work to support increased action on other diversity dimensions in Australia and in Aotearoa New Zealand.

RACS Indigenous health programs and committees, supported by targeted initiatives, recognise and strive to address generations of Indigenous disadvantage in both countries.

The Reconciliation Action Plan (Australia) and Māori Health Action Plan (Aotearoa New Zealand) set out RACS' vision to improve health outcomes for Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and Māori patients in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand. Implementing these plans well relies on effective partnerships with the Australian Indigenous Doctors' Association, Te Ohu Rata o Aotearoa (Māori Medical Practitioners Association), the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation and Leaders in Indigenous Medical Education.

Progress to support cultural competence and cultural safety during the year includes:

- The College, with the support of the Foundation for Surgery,

launched Te Rau Poka, a surgical academy for Māori. Ambitious targets for the academy include increasing the proportion of Māori surgeons to match the proportion of Māori in the general Aotearoa New Zealand (AoNZ) population. The aim is to train 150 Māori surgeons by 2040 in time for the bicentenary of Te Tiriti o Waitangi, Treaty of Waitangi. This is the equivalent of around 18 per cent of the ~800 Kiwi surgeons practising in AoNZ.

- RACS appointed Professor Jonathon Koea – Professor of Surgery at the University of Auckland and head of the Upper Gastrointestinal Unit at North Shore – to the newly created role Māori Trainee Liaison Lead.
- Reconciliation Australia commended RACS' formal endorsement of its inaugural Innovate Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP). An Innovate RAP strengthens and develops the connections that form the lifeblood of all RAP commitments.
- Te Rautaki Māori – RACS Māori Health Strategy and Action Plan. Cultural Safety Plan 2020 – 2023 remained in place.
- RACS Indigenous Scholarships aim to support the goal of ensuring there are no structural impediments to diversity of applicants. RACS and the Foundation for Surgery fund

a number of scholarships and awards for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and Māori medical students, junior doctors, SET Trainees and Fellows including:

- Career Enhancement Scholarships for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and Māori medical students and junior doctors
- the Foundation for Surgery Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ASC Award - for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and Māori final year medical students and doctors with an interest in surgery to attend the College's Annual Scientific Congress (ASC)
- SET Scholarships for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island and Māori SET Trainees
- RACS Māori Health Medal which acknowledges significant contributions by Fellows to indigenous health advocacy and health outcomes in Aotearoa New Zealand.
- RACS Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Medal acknowledging significant contributions by Fellows to Indigenous health advocacy and health outcomes in Australia.
- RACS supported the 2023 Voice to Parliament.
- In 2023 RACS created an Implicit Bias Working party to better

understand the unknown bias that may be present in personal relationships as well as institutionalised implicit biases. This group will give official recommendations in 2024.

- Council also approved a new CPD requirement in 2023 for implementation in the following year. In 2024, all medical practitioners will be required to undertake activities aligning to Cultural Safety, Addressing Health Inequity, Professionalism and Ethical Practice (CAPE). These new requirements have been introduced by the Australian Medical Council (AMC) and Te Kaunihera Rata o Aotearoa – Medical Council of New Zealand. To comply with these new requirements, all participants in the RACS CPD Program must undertake at least one activity per annum in:
 - Cultural safety
 - Addressing health inequities
 - Professionalism
 - Ethical practice

Anti-racism

RACS is addressing racism at individual and systemic levels. Through training and information, the College is supporting surgeons so they can more effectively address interpersonal racism and the unacceptable behaviour of individuals in workplaces.

The profession also shares a broader, collective responsibility to recognise and dismantle the structures and processes that perpetuate racial stereotypes, prejudice and inequity, in the interests of patient safety and the wellbeing of our workforce.

RACS has:

- supported surgeons to more effectively address interpersonal racism and the unacceptable behaviour of individuals in workplaces, through training and information
- Established an Anti-Racism working group
- Adopted an Anti-Racism policy
- Developed and published an Anti-Racist position statement
- Promoted this work widely through all available communication channels
- Upskilled our Executive Directors of Surgical Affairs in Australia and Surgical Advisor Aotearoa New Zealand, so they can provide effective and current information about addressing racism to peers, colleagues and Trainees.



Modernise RACS governance

Efforts to modernise RACS governance structures gained momentum in 2023, with the appointment of a Recovery Committee to ensure RACS successfully navigated the financial crisis. The new emergency governance arrangements marked a pivotal, structural shift, aligning responsibilities and risks with the individuals and entities best equipped to handle them. The updated structure preserves a meaningful role for both the Council and the Executive, and ensures the College is governed with the necessary expertise and oversight while continuing to serve the membership.

During the year, the Recovery Committee, made up of the president, vice president and four skill-based non-FRACS members, informed by high level executive members, was crucial in navigating the crisis and restoring stability to the College's finances.

The interim governance structure proved effective and fit for purpose. In 2024, the Fellowship will vote on a proposal to permanently restructure College governance in line with interim arrangements.

Also during the year, RACS took steps to improve professionalism in College meetings, with the introduction of a meeting etiquette slide. It is shown and discussed at each RACS committee meeting, working group

meeting, and council meeting across Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand. It outlines the need to ask questions constructively, avoid dominating the conversation, reminds that inappropriate behaviour will not be tolerated, that disagreements should be voiced respectfully and that meeting participants should be open to different viewpoints.

Wellbeing

The RACS Wellbeing Action Plan 2022-2026, developed by the RACS Wellbeing Working Group, outlines a comprehensive strategy to enhance the wellbeing of surgeons, including Trainees, Fellows, and Specialist International Medical Graduates (SIMGs).

The plan aims to create a supportive environment for surgeons' physical, mental, and social health throughout their careers.

The plan integrates wellbeing principles into training and professional development, ensuring they are a core component of the curriculum. It provides various support resources, such as the RACS Support Program offering confidential counselling for personal and work-related issues and encourages regular health check-ups. The plan promotes self-care by setting boundaries, recognizing symptoms of stress, and seeking professional support, supported by professional development programs focused on

time management, stress coping, and conflict resolution.

RACS also advocates for a culture that prioritizes surgeons' wellbeing through the Wellbeing Charter for Doctors, emphasizing shared responsibility among stakeholders.

Collaborations

In line with the Building Respect Action Plan 2022, RACS understands the value of collaborations within the profession and across the health sector to foster a culture of respect. We note the work during 2022 of A Better Culture (ABC) - a coalition of health professionals from across health networks and professions. Funded by the Commonwealth and hosted by the Royal Australasian College of Medical Administrators, ABC strives to eliminate bullying, stamp out all forms of harassment, have zero tolerance for racism, and eliminate discrimination through a workplace health and safety model.

RACS encourages senior leaders to join ABC working groups.

- *Fact Sheet: Recognising and Responding to Sexual Harassment.* Created and published in 2023. Designed to allow RACS Fellows to understand, identify and speak out to prevent Sexual Harassment.
- *Fact sheet: Victimisation.* Created and published in 2023 to clarify the meaning of victimisation, how it impacts on people and why is it unacceptable.

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- *Fact Sheet: Bullying, Sexual Harassment, Discrimination.* Refreshed in 2023 to align with new national standard for health and safety requirements for employers.
 - RACS encourages surgeons to undertake training to support professionalism and help them manage their wellbeing and behaviour in high risk, high stress work environments.



Pillar two: Surgical Education

Improving surgical education is a cornerstone of our commitment to building a culture of respect in surgery and is consistent with our vision to lead surgical performance, professionalism and improve patient care.

Initiatives and actions in 2023 include:

- Identifying and Addressing Microaggressions course was introduced, focused on supporting surgeons to speak up and call out unprofessional behaviour. It was developed as a stand-alone course to support the 'Building Respect' initiative and address the RACS competency, 'Cultural competence and cultural safety'. The course is evidence-based and includes an exploration of behaviours that comprise microaggression, as well as how to address microaggression in the workplace. Content from this course has been incorporated into 'Introduction to Operating with Respect'.
- Action to support participation in training to build respect and foster professionalism in surgery. RACS has mandated groups of surgeons to complete Foundation Skills for Surgical Educators (FSSE) and Operating with Respect (OWR) courses within set timeframes. The training mandate was endorsed by BSET (now CSET) in 2018. An escalation protocol for non-compliance has been implemented.
- Educator Studio Sessions were well attended. Themes focused on leadership, bullying, mentorship, coaching, surgeons as leaders.
- An online surgical education journal club was introduced and well-attended, with guest co-facilitators including expert medical educators – Professor Tim Wilkinson, Professor Victoria Brazil and Associate-Professor Joy Rudland.
- Tri-state webinar series. RACS New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland partnered to present a series of webinars throughout 2023, focusing on the need for surgical leadership.
- Rigorous review of the Operating with Respect (OWR) course. After close evaluation the course was revised to optimise the educational experience, incorporate new content (including addressing diversity and inclusion, including up-to-date research, micro-aggressions and to reflect current workplace experiences and practices).
- Offered the OWR course eleven times between March 2023 and October 2023.
- Retired the Operating with Respect e-learning module and replaced it with an Introduction to Operating with Respect (IOWR). Completing IOWR is a pre-requisite

for participation in OWR and for application to SET.

- A Trainee specific version of OWR was developed but shelved after several unsuccessful attempts to pilot it during the pandemic in 2021 and 2022.
- RACS is supporting a new study into the nature, extent and impact of bullying in surgical settings. The study aims to investigate the views of surgeons on negative and disrespectful verbal and non-verbal behaviour and bullying in surgical settings, including its impact on surgeons themselves and the surgical staff they oversee. RACS plans to use the finding of this study to improve OWR course content and focus on new areas of concern.
- Cultural safety e-learning module introduced in 2023 within the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health and Cultural Safety eLearning program. These eLearning courses are designed for all Fellows, Trainees, SIMGs and junior doctors.
- The Foundation Skills for Surgical Educators (FSSE) was revised, with new videos to increase the interactivity and quality of learning materials.



Pillar two: Accountability and Complaints Management

RACS has increased the emphasis on supporting fellows, trainees, staff, patients and whānau who are experiencing issues that are concerning for them. Many people are reluctant to make a formal complaint about a fellow, but it is important that we are aware of issues of concern. RACS has changed the focus from complaints to “enquiries, concerns and complaints”.

RACS doesn't have the capacity to perform investigations focused on supporting professionalism in surgery and making sure that all concerns and complaints are handled by the agency best placed to manage them. Any queries, concerns or complaints are reviewed by the team and the best option for each one is established. For example, issues of clinical outcome are referred to the HCCC in Australia or the HDC in Aotearoa New Zealand.

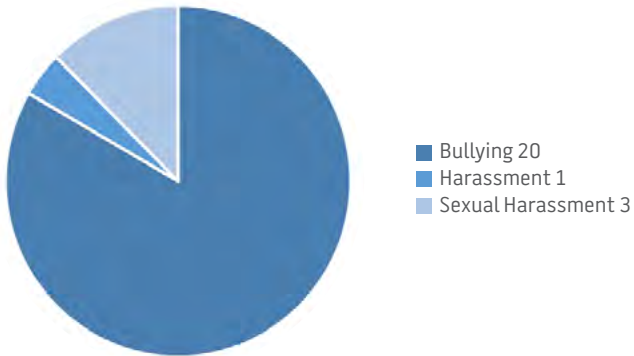
RACS has continued to strengthen their communication and support to the enquirer/complainant and respondent, Issues of communication or professionalism often result in a “constructive conversation” either face to face or over the phone with the respondent. In addition, follow-up contact was made with both the enquirer/complainant and respondent to ensure the required support was provided. Anonymity of the enquirer is protected if requested and no action taken but a record of the issue kept in a secure database so

that RACS is aware of further issues involving the same respondent. The data base is also checked when a fellow is put forward for a RACS award, committee or similar and if necessary, concerns may be raised.

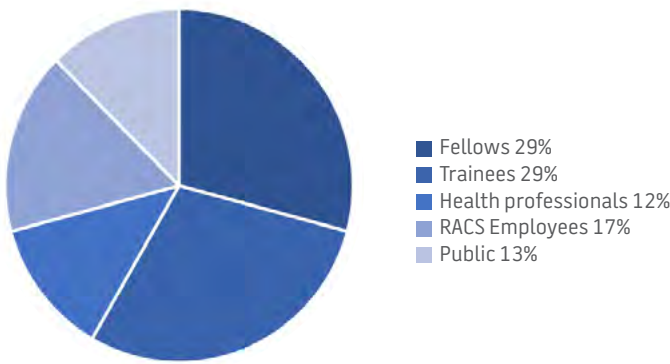
Handling concerns and complaints effectively is a crucial component to RACS maintaining public trust and upholding a high standard of professionalism and patient safety within the surgical community. Addressing complaints promptly and transparently ensures that issues like misconduct, discrimination, or unsafe practices are resolved, fostering a respectful work environment and protecting both fellows and patients.

- Update in December 2023 of Advice, Support and Complaints RACS Policy. A greater emphasis has been placed on the importance and role of RACS in supporting all parties when an enquiry, concern or complaint is made to RACS. The concept of a “cup-of-coffee” conversation has been replaced with a “constructive conversation”. The website is being updated to reflect the greater emphasis on support.
- Review of Privacy of Personal Information Policy document (November 2023) to ensure our policy is up to date and complies with national law.
- Update of RACS Whistleblower Policy.

Number of Complaints received about Bullying, Discrimination Sexual Harassment and Harassment in 2023.

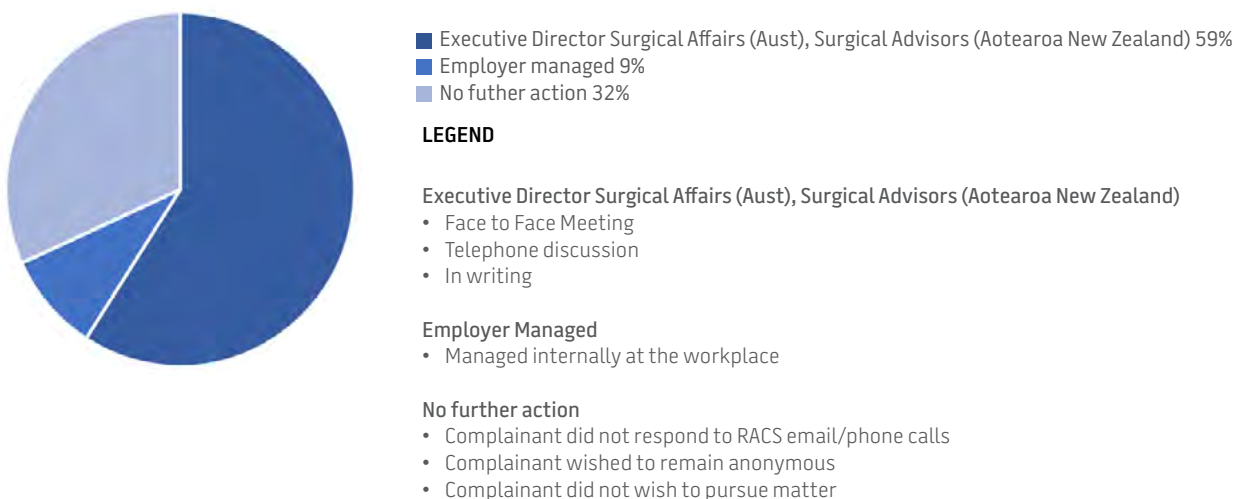


The source of enquires / complaints received in 2023.



The mode of resolution of the Bullying, Discrimination , Sexual Harassment and Harassment complaints received in 2023.

Note: Excludes cases that are still in progress.



These graphs from available data show the incidence and handling of DBSH issues reported as complaints to RACS in 2023, by number, source of complaint and process of resolution.

There has been a slight decrease (to 24 from 28 complaints) in reporting of DBSH issues to RACS, consistent with previous years’ reporting trends. These data reflect DBSH issues raised through RACS formal complaints avenue only. DBSH issues that arise through the Reconsideration, Review, and Appeals process, made directly to the Specialty Training Committees/ Boards and as a result of hospital accreditation processes, are not shown.

Data from the Medical Board of Australia’s 2023 Medical Training Survey show that 30% of RACS trainees reported experiencing bullying, harassment, discrimination and/ or racism, and 40% witnessed these behaviours.



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