

Why do acute healthcare staff behave unprofessionally towards each other and how can these behaviours be reduced? A realist review

Justin A Aunger,¹ Ruth Abrams,¹ Johanna I Westbrook,²
Judy M Wright,³ Mark Pearson,⁴ Aled Jones,⁵
Russell Mannion⁶ and Jill Maben^{1*}

¹School of Health Sciences, Faculty of Health and Medical Sciences, University of Surrey, Guildford, UK

²Australian Institute of Health Innovation, Macquarie University, Sydney, New South Wales, Australia

³School of Medicine, Faculty of Medicine and Health, University of Leeds, Leeds, UK

⁴Wolfson Palliative Care Research Centre, Hull York Medical School, University of Hull, Hull, UK

⁵School of Nursing and Midwifery, Faculty of Health, University of Plymouth, Plymouth, UK

⁶Health Services Management Centre, University of Birmingham, Birmingham, UK

*Corresponding author j.maben@surrey.ac.uk

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Plain language summary

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Plain language summary

For this study, we asked: how, why and in what situations can unprofessional behaviour between healthcare staff working in acute care (usually hospitals) be reduced, managed and prevented? We wanted to research how people understand unprofessional behaviour, explore the circumstances leading to unprofessional behaviour and understand how existing approaches to addressing unprofessional behaviour worked (or did not work) across staff groups and acute healthcare organisations.

We used a literature review method called a 'realist review', which differs from other review methods. A realist review focuses on understanding not only if interventions work but how and why they work, and for whom. This allowed us to analyse a wider range of relevant international literature – not only academic papers.

We found 148 sources, which were relevant either because they described unprofessional behaviour or because they provided information on how to address unprofessional behaviour. Definitions of unprofessional behaviour varied, making it difficult to settle on one description. For example, unprofessional behaviour may involve incivility, bullying, harassment and/or microaggressions. We examined what might contribute to unprofessional behaviour and identified factors including uncertainty in the working environment. We found no United Kingdom-based interventions and only one from the United States of America that sought to reduce unprofessional behaviour towards minority groups. Strategies often tried to encourage staff to speak up, provide ways to report unprofessional behaviour or set social standards of behaviour. We also identified factors that may make it challenging for organisations to successfully select, implement and evaluate an intervention to address unprofessional behaviour.

We recommend a system-wide approach to addressing unprofessional behaviour, including assessing the context and then implementing multiple approaches over a long time (rather than just once), because they are likely to have greater impact on changing culture. We are producing an implementation guide to support this process. Interventions need to enhance staff ability to feel safe at work, work effectively and support those more likely to experience unprofessional behaviour.

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