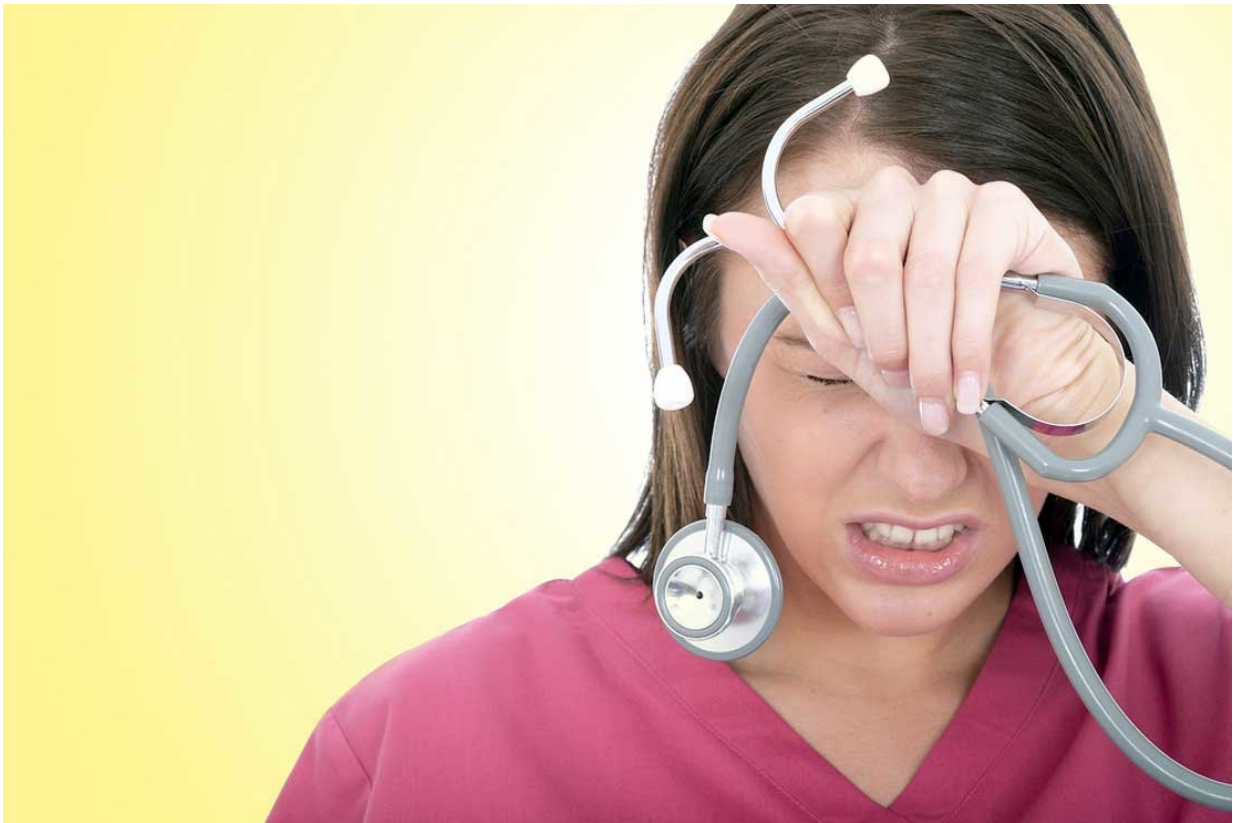


Nurses often cyberbullied by patients and families

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There are key differences between cyberbullying and traditional face-to-face bullying in workplaces. Credit: Massey University

Research by a Massey University PhD candidate into workplace cyberbullying has found that nurses not only experience bullying by

other staff, but also by patients and their families.

PhD candidate Natalia D'Souza says the nurses who participated in her study described specific differences between [cyberbullying](#) and traditional face-to-face bullying, including the ability for people outside their organisation to bully them constantly.

"With traditional bullying, you would usually place bans on people and restrict their entry into the facility but, with cyberbullying, that is not possible," Ms D'Souza says. "So, nurses now have this additional source of bullying but there are no measures put in place to manage it."

Ms D'Souza says patient care responsibilities also make it difficult for nurses to block communication if they are being bullied by electronic channels.

"I was told about one case where a [nurse](#) was being bullied by a patient's mother, and she used her son to gain access. She would call to ask for help for her son, but then start abusing the nurse, so the nurse was hesitant to block the calls in case it was a genuine emergency."

Cyberbullying can also affect victim's families

There can also be a public component to cyberbullying when abuse is posted online, Ms D'Souza says.

"Nurses can become concerned about their professional reputation if they are cyberbullied on a public platform like social media," she says. "Sometimes their personal contact details have been posted online, or false allegations made to the Nursing Council.

"This can produce a lot of anxiety as they have no control over who might see it. Nurses in this situation worry not only about their job and

their own wellbeing, but also about the effect on their families should they see the content."

Ms D'Souza also found that nurses who were victims of cyberbullying often suffered traditional forms of [workplace](#) bullying too.

"These bullying behaviours can build on each other to create even greater harm in a more complex and dynamic way," she says. "So, the traditional bullying impacts of anxiety and depression apply, but there is an almost unique anxiety associated with the public nature of cyberbullying, along with the constant accessibility outside of work hours."

Cyberbullying can be a problem in any workplace

While Ms D'Souza's thesis focused on the nursing profession, she says its implications would apply in other workplaces.

"One of the things that clearly emerged from my research is that cyberbullying is still an unknown problem and organisations are not sure how to deal with it. A lot of organisations have social media policies that outline what staff can and can't do, but they don't have policies to protect staff from external abuse."

She recommends explicitly including cyberbullying in workplace bullying and harassment policies.

"It shows staff that cyberbullying is something the organisation takes seriously and, if it happens to them, they can see that it is recognised as a form of [workplace bullying](#) and there are processes for reporting it."

She also suggests organisations create pathways for getting support from Netsafe, which can assist and support victims, including working with

[social media](#) platforms to get content removed.

"Cyberbullying needs to be acknowledged as a problem first, then supporting mechanisms need to be implemented to encourage people to report. In the absence of education and prevention, it is a problem that will continue to grow because of the accessibility that electronic devices provide. I also expect to see new types of cyberbullying as technology develops."

Provided by Massey University

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