Part 2 I feel I have witnessed discrimination, bullying, or undermining

Intro

In Orthopaedics, we often work in high-pressure environments. Sometimes I might see a colleague being mistreated, spoken to disrespectfully, or excluded because of their gender, ethnicity, age, or other characteristics.

When this happens, I have a choice. If I stay silent, the behaviour may continue, and the person being targeted may feel even more isolated. If I step in safely and appropriately, I can help protect them, reduce harm, and send a clear message that discrimination is not acceptable in our workplace.

Have I witnessed discrimination, bullying, or undermining?

I ask myself:

- Is the behaviour repeated, hostile, or humiliating?
- Does it focus on someone's personal characteristics (e.g. gender, race, accent, disability)?
- Would most people consider the behaviour disrespectful or unfair?
- How did the person on the receiving end look or react — did they seem uncomfortable, upset, or excluded?

Examples in orthopaedics:

- I hear a senior surgeon make repeated jokes about a female trainee's strength or ability to handle trauma lists.
- A colleague is repeatedly ignored during the MDT meeting, even when they raise important clinical points.
- A scrub nurse is spoken to in a rude and belittling way in front of the team.

What should I do if I feel I have witnessed discrimination?

I can use Active Bystander Frameworks.

The 5Ds of Bystander Intervention https://righttobe.org/guides/bystander-intervention-training/

- Distract – change the subject, interrupt, or find a way to diffuse the situation without direct confrontation.
- Delegate – involve another colleague, senior, or manager to help.
- Document – make a clear, factual note of what I saw and when.
- Delay – if I can't act in the moment, I check in with the person afterwards.
- Direct – if it feels safe, I calmly name the behaviour, confronting the person harming. ("That comment felt inappropriate. Let's keep this professional").

THE THREE A'S OF BEING AN ACTIVE BYSTANDER

ACT

NOW OR LATER

To prevent immediate harm, confront the behaviour assertively in a safe and appropriate way.
OR Address the behaviour after the incident, ensuring safety.

APPROACH

THE PERPETRATOR OR THE RECIPIENT

Bring to their attention in a safe and appropriate way that the behaviours observed were not acceptable.
Offer emotional or practical support to the recipient. "are you ok, do you need any support".

ALLY SUPPORT

Seek assistance from others trained to help, such as the Freedom To Speak Up Guardian, supervisors or HR.

Implementing the skills needed to intervene safely and appropriately can help shift workplace culture.

Follow Dr Joe Farmer for more on Civility

linkedin.com/in/drjoefarmer

CIVILITY SAVES LIVES

When and how to intervene safely

- I think first: Am I safe? Is this the right time?
- If the person is senior to me, I may choose to delegate or delay rather than direct confrontation.
- If I intervene, I keep my tone calm and professional.

What can I do to support the person being bullied or undermined?

- I check in with them privately afterwards: “I noticed what happened in theatre earlier, are you okay?”
- I listen without judgment.
- I offer options: “Do you want me to come with you to speak to someone?”
- I let them know about support routes: Freedom to Speak Up Guardian, Clinical Director / Training Programme Director, BOA/RCSEd resources, NHS Support helpline or the GMC confidential helpline.

What can I do to improve my wellbeing?

Witnessing discrimination can also affect me. I may feel guilty, angry, or unsure if I did enough.

- I remind myself that doing something is always better than doing nothing.
- I reflect on what went well and what I could do differently next time.
- I talk it through with a trusted colleague, mentor, or support service.
- I look after myself, stepping up as a bystander should not come at the cost of my own wellbeing.