

OH TODAY

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STAMPING OUT RACISM

Written by
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WHAT IS RACISM?

Racism is a virus that can linger in organisations because of internalised racist stereotypes (unconscious bias). It is up to us to break these stereotypes down and make positive steps in eradicating racism. In the workplace, racism most often manifests itself through microaggressions, which are defined as indirect, subtle or even unintentional acts of discrimination against members of a marginalised group. I for one have experienced such events. [According to ACAS](#) racism and/or race hate incidents are defined as acts of violence and/or hostility against people because of their race and are illegal under the Equality Act 2010. The majority of people are fully aware of the textbook definition of racism, but many people are not aware of the severity of the problem. [A qualitative study by TUC](#) showed that over 70% of ethnic minority workers have experienced racial harassment at work and around 60% feel they have been subject to unfair treatment by their employer.

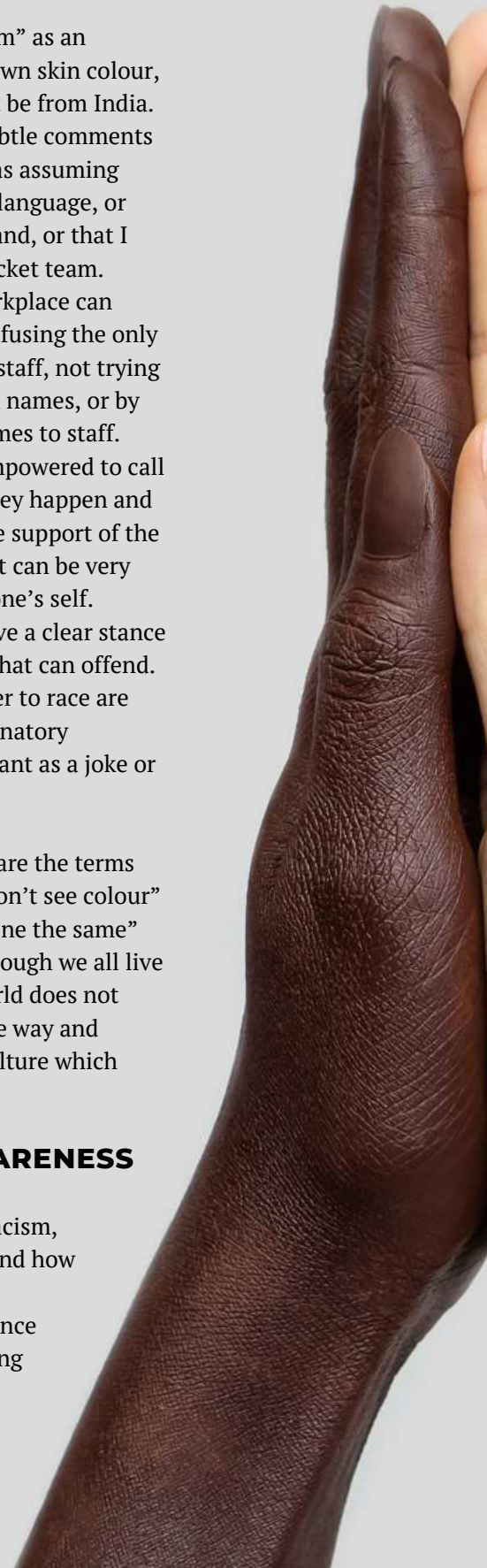
Racism is often unintentional and exhibited as behaviours that individuals did not realise were racist or discriminatory. Most people would not consider themselves as racist, however, that does not mean that occasionally people may do or say something that is unintentionally racist for example calling a member of the BAME community “coloured” because that is what they grew up with, even though this is not acceptable today. A person does not have to intend malice to do or say something that can be considered racist for example, asking somebody where they are from but

not accepting “Birmingham” as an answer, because of my brown skin colour, people assume that I must be from India. Racism can be found in subtle comments and preconceptions such as assuming that English isn’t my first language, or that I wasn’t born in England, or that I must have been on the cricket team. Other examples in the workplace can include things such as confusing the only two minority members of staff, not trying to pronounce non-English names, or by giving “Christian” nicknames to staff. Employees need to feel empowered to call out these behaviours as they happen and to know that they have the support of the company when doing so. It can be very daunting to advocate for one’s self. Organisation’s need to have a clear stance on language and phrases that can offend. Derogatory terms that refer to race are unacceptable and discriminatory regardless if they were meant as a joke or were un-intentional.

Another significant point are the terms “colour blindness” and “don’t see colour” and “I try and treat everyone the same” ignores that fact that, although we all live in the same world, the world does not treat each person the same way and everyone has their own culture which needs to be respected.

INCREASING AWARENESS

Increasing awareness of racism, different types of racism and how to overcome racism, plus enabling cultural competence will create a diverse working community within the Occupational Health (OH)



family, improving relationships and creating forward-thinking OH organisations who are front-runners in the fight against racism.

Employees expect to be treated fairly and considerately in the workplace. OH organisations are generally equal opportunity employers and have policies to reflect such, but equipping staff with the right tools to implement these policies goes that one step further. When it comes to issues of race discrimination and race hate, fair treatment is a moral and legal duty and employers have a responsibility to implement reasonable measures to protect employees, locum staff, customers, clients and service users from harassment plus investigate and respond to any issue they become aware of. Most important, however, is immediate and follow up support. From past experience; having no follow up support can lead to a feeling uncared for and a loss of engagement in the organisation. This will reduce the likelihood of misunderstandings resulting in lower attrition levels, complaints, disciplinary action and employment tribunals, all of which affect service provision negatively. Educating staff about cultural backgrounds, i.e. being “colour sighted” will improve the service, results/outcomes we in OH provide to both employers and patients/service users.

WHAT CAN OH COMPANIES DO?

Provide online or webinar training, specifically around racism and anti-racism and ensure that individuals undertake this annually. The aim is to outline behaviours to staff that can be considered racist or discriminatory and what the impact is on the receiving end so that they do not accidentally perpetuate these behaviours in the future.

Have an official Anti-Racism Campaign. This will promote anti-racist behaviour in all aspects of an organisation and enable strategies

to be incorporated throughout the organisation. This can help to reduce the likelihood of any “accidental racism” and give staff the confidence to call out against racism/whistle blow if they see it happening in any context will be an essential outcome whilst feeling confident that it will be investigated timely and fairly whilst supporting individuals involved.

Create a policy that clearly outlines the reporting process for incidents. A clear process of where employees should go if they experience and/or overhear racism or discrimination. Inclusion of a reporting mechanism that is to a designated Ethnicity Advisor brings in an element of sense checking, to ensure the situation is reported objectively.

Allocate a ‘designated individual’ to assist with the investigation of racist/discriminatory incidents and to support the victim. Situations of discrimination are often very individual and what may, or may not, be felt to be discriminatory can change over time and from person to person. Therefore, it may be useful if the designated individual listed is a member of the BAME community as they are more likely to understand what the individual has experienced and be able to offer appropriate support; especially since there is a likelihood, they may have had a comparable experience.

Incident resolution. As part of the resolution for any racist or discriminatory incidents, having a process will be helpful, for example, a specific training course for individuals to participate in; or reflect on the behaviour. The overall aim is to educate for positive change, not to shame or embarrass.

OH Organisations have a unique position within healthcare. They can play a particularly positive role in anti-racism which ultimately aids society as a whole.

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