

VIEWPOINT

VOICES IN CARDIOLOGY

Introduction to the Sexual Harassment Series



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As the Editor-in-Chief of *JACC: Case Reports*, I was somewhat hesitant about including several articles on such a sensitive topic. However, I realized that we continuously grow as clinicians and human beings throughout our career pathways. We meet many people throughout the course of our journeys—some are true examples of colleagues, inspiring us to become better, and others represent the disappointing side of medicine. Those behaviors may discourage us and may obstruct our way. An example of this unhealthy behavior is harassment—either verbal or sexual. Whether the victim of harassment is a man or a woman, no one deserves this treatment. Thus, we need to speak out together to condemn such attitudes and prevent their occurrences in the future. This 3-part series includes my personal experience, an article about victim blaming, and an article that seeks to present avenues of advocacy to prevent such situations from occurring in the future. We hope these articles will be helpful, and we welcome your feedback.

MY PATH TOWARD EMPOWERMENT

Back home in Greece where I was raised and studied medicine, the #metoo movement gained traction only at the end of January 2021 with the Olympic sailing champion, Sofia Bekatorou, and the next to speak out was a beloved friend of mine and a great advocate of women's rights, the actress Zeta Douka. After these 2 public testimonials, a series of stories surfaced and resulted in the imprisonment of the director of National Theatre. My friend Zeta reminded me, when we were discussing my own story and why I left Greece, that she had told her story, and “now it's the time” for me to tell my story. Now it seems that this page is the right time and place as we raise our “voices.”

In 2015, when I decided to look for other work opportunities, I had 2 possibilities: 1 was in Athens in a

private hospital, and the other was the Cleveland Clinic Abu Dhabi. After the Greek National Congress of Cardiology, I arranged a discussion with 1 of the well-known directors of a large private hospital in Athens about my contract. I didn't know him well because I had only met him once during PCR London Valves when his clinical group was a part of the meeting. He started the conversation about my job contract by telling me that I looked very “innocent and ethical.” I was a bit surprised to hear the word innocent, but I thought he was trying to explain to me why he wanted to hire me. Then, he started explaining that he knows everybody in Greece, from directors of hospitals all the way up to the minister of health. He stated that during my career in cardiology, I would “find him in front of me, wherever I would be.” Then, out of the blue, he said that a condition of my contract would be that we would travel together. He would arrange for me to be a speaker, but we would stay in the same room, and he would expect me to return to the room, and he would like to massage me. A sense of nausea comes to me even now as I remember that moment, just as it did at the time. He continued by threatening that if I told anyone about what he said to me that he would accuse me of being unstable or he would find a way to destroy my career. I was shocked. The only thing I asked him was, “Have you realized that I am the same age as your daughter? How dare you?” Then I said I didn't feel well, I stood up suddenly, and I left in a taxi. On my way home, I called my parents and my best friend. I felt fear, confusion, and shock. I called the recruitment officer and canceled my contract. I went on to work for Cleveland Clinic in Abu Dhabi for almost 2 years. It took 6 years for me to talk about the experience again. I was discussing it with a colleague of mine, and she told me that she had the same experience, with the same person. I realized that this was a predatory pattern.

Throughout my life, I have been blessed to meet wonderful people and have mentors who left their

signature on my heart and shaped me as a human being and as a doctor. When I went to Boston in 2012 (before the foregoing incident), I observed colleagues who had high ethical and moral values, and they appropriately supported me and taught me equality and human rights but also not to accept abuse, either verbal or, of course, any type of sexual harassment. At the time, I was being overworked and treated poorly by a colleague from the United Kingdom. In Boston, I had the opportunity to become a better human being and time to think about where I stood. One day, as I sat with a good friend of mine in Boston, he helped me to write in a polite way, “I am not willing to work with you anymore.” It was the first step toward “freedom” and establishing boundaries that would later give me the same strength when I was faced with the harassment in Greece. I keep observing the people whom I admire, the people to whom I look up. Together with the way that my parents raised me, when this sexual harassment occurred, I was empowered to say “no,” regardless of the consequences—and to leave the job offer because I have always believed that when “a door closes, another one opens.”

At this point, I wish to acknowledge my father. He was a wonderful teacher for thousands of students. He was a mentor, an educator, and a role model, and he worked with many young people as a professor. He was exceptionally patient and kind with his students, and he taught my brother and me that kindness, honesty, and transparency, even sometimes when they hurt, are the ONLY way forward. Even struggling against harassment, bullying, and

anger, kindness and respect for our peers are the only way.

These experiences have made me utterly intolerant of every form of bullying or harassment. I find these behaviors unacceptable, and I speak out always, even if there is no pragmatic solution. What do I mean by pragmatic solution? You would expect that whoever is bullying or whoever is verbally harassing a junior colleague would be suspended or even lose their job. Unfortunately, I have seen these behaviors ignored and brushed under the carpet, which makes me feel exceptionally uncomfortable. In general, I have not always had an easy time in my career. I have been bullied and witnessed bullying in my work environments. As a resident, I could not do much but just sit and watch. But as we advance in the profession, we know that we can help, we can act against it.

We need to be the role models for the younger generations of clinicians, we need to speak out, to establish equality, to promote fairness, and to teach empowerment. We need to establish committees in our hospitals in favor of equality and to end harassment. We need to condemn unhealthy behaviors, to raise your “voices.” As Zeta Douka said, “now is the time—not tomorrow, but now.”

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