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Royal College of Surgeons of England is failing female, ethnic minority, and LGBT+ members, finds review

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The Royal College of Surgeons of England (RCS England) needs a “radical shake-up” after a diversity review revealed a general sense that women, people from ethnic minorities, and those from the LGBT+ community do not feel represented or valued.¹

The review uncovered many stark examples of racism, sexism, and homophobia experienced by surgeons during their training and throughout their careers as well as at the college, including the use of racial slurs and people being “outed.”

The review, commissioned by the college and carried out by Helena Kennedy QC, was based on the deliberations and experiences of a panel of experts alongside findings from focus groups and interviews with 75 surgeons and medical students, and a survey of college members which received over 1400 responses.

It found that two in three people from a black ethnic background felt that the college was not representative of people like them, while just one in three women felt they were important to the college.

“We anticipate dismay when some of the findings from this review are shared. The findings do not cast surgeons or the college in a progressive, modern, or particularly attractive light. We have heard of ‘jokes’ being made about rape and sexual assault and about the ‘N word’ being used by surgeons,” the report said.

The report team said they heard from people who were “upset and bewildered by inappropriate sidebar conversations in and around college meetings.”

The review shared many personal stories, including of a gay woman surgeon who was told not to mention her sexuality if she wanted her career to progress and a surgeon of Middle Eastern heritage who was introduced to his team as “the departmental terrorist.” Other experiences included surgeons from a South Asian background being told they have a “corner shop mentality” and a consultant turning someone down for a job because “I don’t want a gay in the department.”

The survey found that just a quarter of the 800 respondents who experienced harassment or abuse reported it to someone senior.

College council

The council is one area of the college that needs to change, the report concluded. In the 2020 elections there was significant upset after four white men were elected to the four top positions in the council (president and three vice president positions).

The most cited barrier to achieving a senior role in college life was the “old boys’ network,” the review found. It said that there seemed to be a culture of

shoulder tapping and at the same time no monitoring to ensure that the college was representative of its members. Developing a diverse ecosystem “did not appear to have been a priority,” said the review.

The report said that without change, the council “risks being staffed largely by a self-selecting group who have the resources to work within the system and have little incentive to change it.” It said a “radical shake-up, and deliberate injection of diversity into council” is the only way to change this. At least one woman vice president and regional representations should be added into the council, including for “international regions,” recommended the review.

Women surgeons

According to the report, only one in four women feel the college represents people like them, while just one in six women feel the college effectively combats discrimination.

The report looked at the college’s Women in Surgery initiative, founded in the early 1990s to support female surgeons, which was spoken of highly by many women. The review team found, however, that it appeared to be “tangential to, rather than core to, the strategy and operations of the college.” For example, the chair of Women in Surgery was not a council role. As a result, “women’s issues (the issues of 50% of the population) are marginalised and seen to be the concern of this group or network alone.” The reviewers said the programme needs to be refreshed.

Black surgeons

The report found that 66% of surgeons from a black ethnic background did not feel that the college represented them. “I feel, as a black surgeon, that I suffer a different level of scrutiny from other surgeons—and have access to much less support—and it can be frightening,” an anonymous testimony read.

Another said, “It’s very subtle, it’s the way you’re ignored completely—you go to a meeting and you’re the only black person there—and even colleagues from your own hospital don’t seem to have time for you when their white colleagues are around. You’re left asking ‘shall I force my way into the conversation?’ but you leave it because you don’t feel welcome.”

The review said black and Asian men and women suffer a “double jeopardy in discrimination terms—not only from colleagues within hospitals and healthcare settings but also from patients.” It called for the college to do more “to amplify, reinforce, or codify in standards the various NHS trust and NHS bodies’ work on allyship and bystander training.”

LGBT+ surgeons

The report went on to highlight the difficulties faced by LGBT+ surgeons, including when it comes to LGBT+ trainees “coming out” and pointed to examples of both blatant and subtle discriminations when they did, as well as reports of people being “‘outed’ painfully.”

The reviewers said that while the college must recognise that election mechanisms and recruitment methods need to change, they must also “develop the empathy and understanding” to make the environments more welcoming to begin with.

“An absence of welcome, or of a sense of belonging, for women, disabled, LGBT+ surgeons, and surgeons of colour came through time and time again in this review,” they concluded.

Reforming the college

The report outlined a 16 point plan for improving diversity within surgery and the college. The college has been tasked with developing an action plan, to be completed within three months, for how these recommendations will be achieved.

In response to the findings, RCS England has committed to the review’s reform target which states that within two presidential terms (5-6 years) the college leadership and council will reflect the diversity of the workforce.

College president Neil Mortensen, who commissioned the review as one of his first acts of business in July 2020, after complaints from many women and ethnic minority members, said, “I am proud to confirm that we will commit to support the vision developed by the review and put diversity at the heart of the college’s strategy.”

1 Royal College of Surgeons of England. Our professional home: an independent review on diversity and inclusion for the Royal College of Surgeons of England. 18 March 2021. www.rcseng.ac.uk/about-the-rcs/about-our-mission/diversity-review-2021.